

FLYING TO THE RESCUE



**Ted Scott
Flying Stories**

FRANKLIN W. DIXON



1930

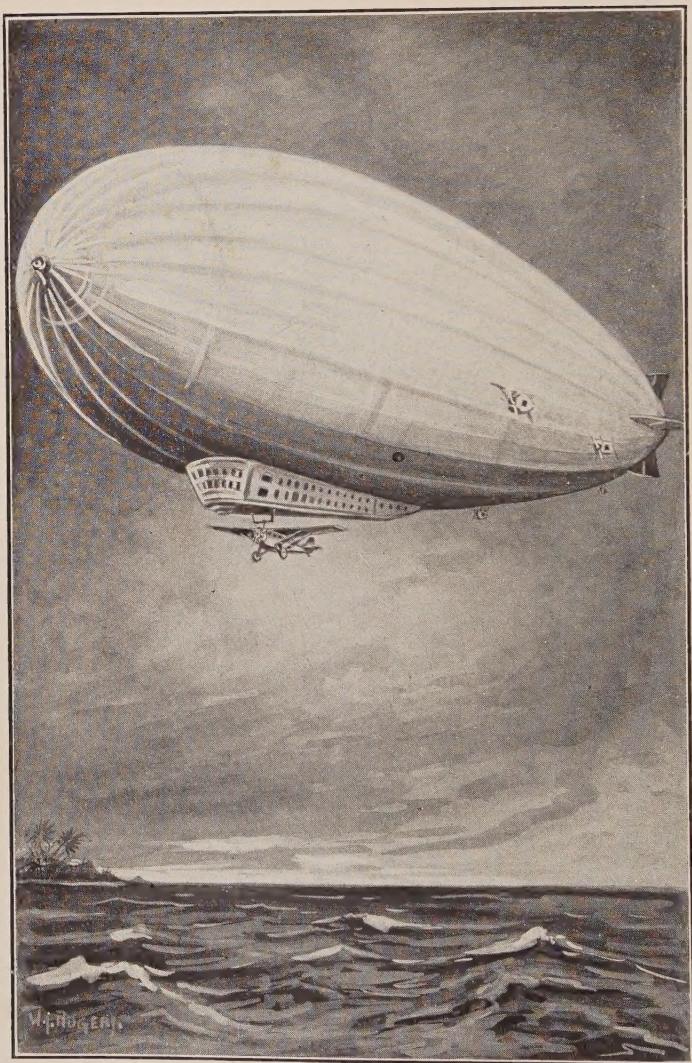
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THERE CAME A TUG, A SLIGHT JOLT, AS THE HOOK
SETTLED OVER THE TRAPEZE.

Flying to the Rescue.

Frontispiece (Page 158)

THE TED SCOTT FLYING STORIES

FLYING TO THE RESCUE

OR

TED SCOTT AND THE BIG
DIRIGIBLE

By

FRANKLIN W. DIXON

AUTHOR OF

"OVER THE OCEAN TO PARIS,"

"THROUGH THE AIR TO ALASKA,"

"THE HARDY BOYS: THE GREAT AIRPORT MYSTERY," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY

WALTER S. ROGERS

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Flying to the Rescue

Made in the United States of America

TO THE HEROES OF THE AIR

WILBUR WRIGHT—ORVILLE WRIGHT

The first men to fly in a heavier-than-air machine

LOUIS BLERIOT

The first to fly the English Channel

CAPTAIN JOHN ALCOCK

The first to fly from Newfoundland to Ireland

COMMANDER RICHARD E. BYRD

In command flying over the North Pole

COLONEL CHARLES A. LINDBERGH

First to fly alone from New York to Paris

CLARENCE D. CHAMBERLIN

First to fly from New York to Germany

LIEUTENANTS LESTER J. MAITLAND—ALBERT F.
HEGENBERGER

First to fly from California to Hawaii

CAPTAIN HERMANN KOEHL—COMMANDANT
JAMES C. FITZMAURICE

First to fly Westward across the North Atlantic—Ireland
to Greenely Island

CAPTAIN GEORGE H. WILKINS—CARL B. EIELSON

First to fly over the Polar Sea from Alaska to Spitzbergen.

And a host of other gallant airmen of the Past and
Present who, by their daring exploits, have made aviation
the wonderful achievement it is to-day

THIS SERIES OF BOOKS
IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED

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FLYING TO THE RESCUE

CHAPTER I

THE SKULKING SHADOW

"It's the biggest job you ever tackled, Walter," declared Ted Scott, the celebrated ocean flyer and most famous airman of all time, as he swung about to face his companion, his eyes kindling with interest.

"I think so myself," replied Walter Hapworth, a noted airplane builder and Ted Scott's closest friend. "It certainly has kept me right on my toes for months past. But if it does what I think it will, I'll be paid for all my trouble."

"Righto," agreed Ted. "When that plane comes out it'll create a sensation in the flying world. It'll throw all others in the shade. Buyers will fall all over themselves in the scramble to get one, and you'll have more orders than you can fill."

"That wouldn't make me mad," rejoined Hapworth, with a smile, "and I hope that you're a true prophet. Of course," he added, with a shade of anxiety in evidence, "I may be counting my chickens before they are hatched. So far, I've been working on a theory. I think that the theory is sound, but no one knows how a plane will act until it actually goes up in the air."

"As I have reason to know," agreed Ted. "I've tested many a new plane that was expected to set the world on fire, but that proved to be an awful frost. But from what you've told me, this new plane of yours seems to be the real goods. Let's take another squint at those plans."

Hapworth produced some blue prints from an inside pocket and the two friends bent over them with keenest interest—an interest so absorbing, in fact, that neither of them noticed the shadow of a man's figure that passed swiftly over the lawn and disappeared in some bushes near the veranda of the Bromville House, on which the pair were sitting.

It was late at night and Ted Scott and Walter Hapworth were the only occupants of the porch. An electric bulb above their heads threw a bright light upon the papers, but left the rest of the porch in semi-darkness.

"The helicopter principle!" murmured Ted, after a prolonged study of the plans. "The

principle that thousands of the ablest engineers and scientists have been trying for years to embody in a machine that will really work! Say, Walter, if you've really succeeded in doing it, you've made the greatest advance that aviation has known for twenty years."

"It seems so to me," replied Hapworth. "It does away with a runway altogether. The plane will rise up straight in the air from wherever it happens to be and come down in the same way. Up to now the plane has had to run along for hundreds of yards before it could rise into the sky. That made big flying fields necessary. The average citizen hasn't any such amount of ground at hand, so he's given up the idea of owning an airplane and stuck to his automobile, which can be housed in a small garage. But let him see that he can keep an airplane in his back yard, mount straight up into the air without any preliminary run and come back in the same way, and what's the answer?"

"The answer," replied Ted enthusiastically, "is that the sky will soon be dotted with airplanes, as the roads are now dotted with cars. Dad will step out of the back door after breakfast, jump into the plane and be whisked to his office in a jiffy. Mother and the girls will have one of their own for going shopping. The big office buildings and department stores will have their roofs fitted up to receive and store the

planes while their owners are in the buildings. Why, old boy, there are millions in it!"

There was a faint rustling in the bushes at the end of the porch, so faint, however, that it might have been attributed to the wind.

"Of course," Ted went on, "there are other things to be considered than the ability of the plane to rise vertically and descend in the same way. It must be able to hover indefinitely over a given spot, to descend safely in case of engine failure, to move horizontally at a reasonable speed, and be easily controlled under all kinds of weather conditions."

"Yes," assented Hapworth. "All those things have been taken into account by my engineers and by me. And I can tell you it hasn't been easy! Any number of hard problems have come up in the course of the work. At times we've almost despaired. But we've mastered the difficulties one by one, and we'll soon have the machine ready for the test."

"I hope you've patented the main features," observed Ted. "It would be maddening to have some other manufacturer steal your ideas and profit by your work."

"It surely would," agreed Hapworth. "And there are plenty who would do it in a minute if they had the chance. But I've safeguarded myself in every way possible and I don't think there can be any slip.

"There's one thing, however," he went on,

"that has to be straightened out before I can feel perfectly easy in my mind. There are two features in the engine that are entirely novel on this side of the water, but which have been more or less developed by European scientists. I doubt very much whether my devices actually infringe on anything they have patented. But I don't want to run into a lawsuit and so, to make perfectly sure that there will be no tangle of any kind, I've sent one of my trusted men abroad to buy up the patents in question."

Again there was that faint, almost imperceptible rustle in the bushes.

"That's a good idea," approved Ted. "It's better to be safe than sorry. Once get in a legal tangle and there's no telling when you'll pull out of it. Who's the man you sent over? I suppose, of course, he's perfectly reliable."

"Absolutely," affirmed Hapworth. "I'd trust him with my life. You know him—Steve Williams. He's been with me for years."

"Oh, Steve," replied Ted. "He's all right. He can't be bribed and he can't be bluffed. When did you hear from him last? How's he getting along with the negotiations?"

"Finely," returned Hapworth. "Had a cablegram from him a couple of days ago in which he said the deal was practically concluded. Had to pay a pretty stiff price, but I'd given him authority to go as far as was necessary."

"Then I suppose he'll be back in a couple of weeks or so," conjectured Ted.

"Sooner than that," was the reply. "He's coming back on the *Mercury*."

"What? You don't mean that great new dirigible?" exclaimed Ted, his tone showing the keen interest that was always evoked in him by anything pertaining to the air.

"Nothing else but," smiled his friend. "It's scheduled to leave at just about the time that Steve will have cleaned up his work, and, if everything goes well, it ought to get over here in about three days from the time it starts."

"Gee, I envy Steve!" exclaimed Ted. "He'll have the time of his life. I'd like nothing better than to be in his place. I've always had a longing to sail in one of those big airships."

"It would be a novel experience," assented his companion. "Yet, after all, I should think it would seem tame to you. You could beat it all hollow in your airplane. Say it takes three days to come over. You flew over the ocean from New York to Paris in about a day and a half."

"Yes," agreed Ted, "when it comes to speed and excitement the airplane has it all over the dirigible. Still, we must admit that the dirigible has some advantages over the plane. It can carry a bigger load of goods and passengers than any airplane ever invented. Then, too, if anything goes wrong with its engines, it

can still keep afloat for a long time, while if the motors of an airplane go dead, the machine is apt to come down in a hurry or the occupants have to jump with parachutes—just as I did one night from a height of thirteen thousand feet.”

“I remember that,” observed Hapworth. “But say, Ted,” he asked in surprise, as he glanced at his watch, “have you any idea how late it is? Nearly one o’clock. Time to turn in.”

“I’m ready to hit the hay,” returned Ted, as he rose from his chair; “especially as I have a lot on hand for to-morrow. How about letting me put those papers of yours in the hotel safe?” he went on, as Hapworth was about to return them to his pocket.

“Oh, I don’t know,” replied Hapworth. “They’re safe enough, I guess, in my pocket. There’s nobody on earth outside yourself who knows that I have them with me.”

Again that faint stir in the bushes!

“They may not know, but they may suspect,” returned Ted earnestly. “Take a fool’s advice, Walter, and let me put them in the safe. I’ll sleep more easily if I know they’re locked up.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” assented Hapworth, as he surrendered them to his friend’s keeping.

They went inside the hotel, wholly unaware of a pair of sinister eyes that watched them

from a head cautiously lifted above the floor of the veranda at the further side.

The last train had come in hours before, and no one was about. Ted unlocked the safe, deposited the plans inside, set the combination, and swung the doors shut. Then, after seeing that everything was secure—the small hotel of which his foster father was the proprietor kept no night force on duty—he and his companion repaired to their respective rooms.

Usually Ted Scott fell asleep almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. But this night he was unusually restless. The great possibilities that lay in his friend's new plane had stirred him deeply, and he lay awake for some time envisioning the future. But nature had her way at last and he fell into a fitful slumber.

How long he slept he did not know. Nor did he know what it was that wakened him and made him sit up in bed with a start.

His eyes sought to pierce the darkness that environed him. No one was in the room. He threw off the bedclothes and glided to the door, unlocked it noiselessly, opened it and stood listening.

Faintly to his ears came a sound from downstairs. It was scarcely perceptible, but he thought he could detect the sound of metal upon metal. It seemed to proceed from the vicinity of the office.

With Ted Scott to think was to act. He

slipped on his trousers and stole to the top of the stairs.

To the slight tapping that still persisted was added a faint ray of light. Yet all the lights had been extinguished when he had locked up for the night.

Stealthily as a panther, Ted drifted down the stairs. On the landing, midway between the first and second floors, he paused and peered over the banisters.

A man was kneeling before the safe, busily engaged in seeking to find the combination. His back was toward Ted and he evidently had no inkling of the latter's presence.

Down the remaining stairs Ted stole, every muscle tensed. As he reached the final step, the door of the safe swung open.

There was a muffled grunt of satisfaction from the burglar.

The next instant Ted Scott had landed upon the man's back like a tiger!

CHAPTER II

IN HOT CHASE

TED SCOTT'S attack was so sudden, so unexpected, and withal so fierce that the marauder went to the floor with a crash. Before he could recover from his bewilderment, Ted's sinewy fingers were feeling for his throat.

Then ensued a tremendous struggle. The intruder was powerfully built, and after the momentary surprise was over, he fought desperately.

But strong as the intruder was, he was no match for the young aviator. Slowly but surely Ted Scott's superiority began to tell. Before three minutes of actual fighting had elapsed he had secured a firm grip on his opponent's throat. In vain the robber sought to loosen that deadly grip. As well might a rat have attempted to shake off a terrier.

There could be but one issue to such a struggle. The burglar's face became purple, his eyes bulged, his form grew limp. His head lolled to one side and consciousness left him.

Instantly Ted Scott relaxed his grasp, for he had no idea of doing more than to put the man

out of commission and then truss him up securely and turn him over to the police.

He was starting to rise to his feet to search for a piece of rope when a diversion occurred.

From the front door of the hotel, outside which he had doubtless been keeping watch, a man hurled himself over the intervening space, knocking Ted, who had partly risen, violently to the floor.

But the newcomer did not pursue this initial advantage. Nor did he pay any attention to his unconscious confederate.

Reaching over into the safe, he grasped the package of Hapworth's papers and was out of the door in a flash.

An instant later Ted Scott was after him, running like a deer.

Down the dark street they tore, pursuer and pursued.

It was a race that woke no echoes, for the stranger's shoes were rubber-soled and Ted's feet were bare. The fact gave a ghostly quality to the flight. They might have been two shadows, so noiselessly did they speed.

At that hour of the night practically no one was abroad. There was no chance of anyone blocking the path of the fugitive. So the chase resolved itself into a matter of individual swiftness.

This should have given an advantage to the fleeing man, as he was comparatively fresh,

while Ted had just emerged from a gruelling struggle.

Still, Ted Scott had reserves of strength yet untouched, and gradually he drew nearer to the man in front. Rage filled his heart and gave wings to his feet.

Nothing could stop him, not even the knowledge that the man was probably armed and at any moment might send a bullet whistling in his direction. He would catch that miscreant, recover those papers, at any risk to himself.

The pair were closer now. Not more than fifty feet separated them. Soon that fifty became forty. Thirty! Twenty! Ten!

Ted Scott gathered himself for the spring.

While the young airman prepares to launch himself on the fleeing robber, it may be well, for the benefit of those who have not read the previous volumes of this series, to tell who Ted Scott was and what had been his adventures up to the time this story opens.

Ted had no memory of his own father and mother. His earliest recollections went back to the time when, emerging from infancy, he had found himself in the care of James and Miranda Wilson, a worthy couple of small means who had come from New England, bringing the child with them, and settled in the town of Bromville.

The Wilsons were kind to the little fellow, sending him to school and taking the best care

of him that they could. But they died within a few months of each other when Ted was about ten years old, and he was again left to the mercies of the world.

His forlorn condition touched the hearts of Eben and Charity Browning, and as they had no children they adopted the little waif as their own. They were goodness itself to him, and he repaid their affection with an equal devotion.

Eben Browning was the proprietor of the Bromville House, which for a long time was the leading hotel of Bromville, a small place in the Middle West. He was an upright and kindly man with the faculty for making and keeping friends, and for a time he prospered. His hotel was a favorite resort of fishermen who came to try their luck in the teeming Rappock River, that ran through the center of the town. Traveling men also soon learned that there was no such cooking as Charity's in all that section, and there was no lack of patronage.

A change came in Eben's fortunes, however, when the Devally-Hipson Corporation, an airplane manufacturing concern, established a mammoth plant in the town. In its wake came hundreds of officials and workmen with their families, and Bromville found itself in the throes of a boom. New hotels sprang up equipped with the latest comforts and conveniences and some luxuries with which Eben's unpretentious little hotel could not compete.

Patronage fell off at the Bromville House, and Eben and Charity were filled with apprehension.

The hardest blow came when the great Hotel Excelsior was built by Brewster Gale, a wealthy and arrogant man of whom little was known before his coming to Bromville. It was a really palatial hotel with rich furniture, broad verandas, beautiful grounds, a band pavilion and other luxuries seldom to be found outside the great cities. In addition, it had a superb golf course that speedily became a favored spot for tournaments and drew expert players from all parts of the country.

Against Brewster Gale the Brownings had a special grievance. Eben had owned the property on which the Excelsior was built and the golf course was laid out. Eben had sold this to Gale for what seemed to be a fair price. But apart from the few hundred dollars that had been paid as deposit money, Eben did not receive a dollar of the purchase price. Aided by cunning and unscrupulous lawyers, Gale entangled Eben in a maze of legal juggleries at the end of which Eben was frozen out while Gale had what seemed to be a clear title to the property.

Ted Scott did everything he could to help along, running errands, waiting on table, cutting the grass, doing odd jobs for people in the town, and turning over what money he made

to the old folks. But his assistance did not count for much until he obtained work when he was about seventeen with the Devally-Hipson Corporation.

With this concern he advanced rapidly. He was clever, industrious and ingenious, and speedily established himself in the esteem of his employers. Above all, he loved his work, and he speedily rose from one position to another until he was familiar with every branch of the business.

The dream of his life was to become an airman. He felt that his home was the sky. He envied the aviators as they circled above in the blue. But to attain his ambition he would have to go to flying school, and that would cost hundreds of dollars, to say nothing of the loss of wages in the weeks he would have to devote to study. So he regretfully put his dreams and longings in the back of his mind.

His opportunity came when Walter Hapworth called at the airplane plant one morning and Ted was assigned to show him through the works.

Hapworth was a wealthy young business man. He was an expert golfer and had come to Bromville to take part in a tournament on the Hotel Excelsior course. His interest in sports had not been confined to golf alone, and he had determined to take up flying as a recreation. For that reason he had called at the

plant to inspect the various types of airplanes.

Ted showed him around the works and answered so readily every question, showed such familiarity with every detail of construction, that he won the visitor's admiration. Learning of Ted's enthusiasm for flying and desire to become an aviator, Hapworth offered to furnish all the money necessary to pay Ted's tuition fees at flying school, as well as enough to cover the loss of wages in the interim.

At the flying school he speedily became the star pupil, demonstrating that he was a born airman and graduating with the highest marks that had ever been given at the institution.

He had no trouble in securing a position with the United States Air Mail Service, and here he speedily gained distinction. He had the night route between St. Louis and Chicago and met with many thrilling adventures. In fog, in sleet, in blizzards, under all conditions of wind and weather, he proved equal to every emergency, and was soon rated as the most brilliant and daring flyer in his division.

At that time the country was deeply stirred by the project to cross the Atlantic by airplane.

Ted had been greatly wrought up by the coming contest and longed intensely to enter it. But he would have to purchase a plane as well as provide thousands of dollars for expenses, and he had practically no money. Here again Walter Hapworth came to his assistance and

offered to finance the project. The latter had acquired an airplane plant in San Francisco, and it was there that he sent Ted to supervise the building of the plane.

From time to time rumors had come out of the West that an ambitious youngster, Scott by name, was planning to enter the transatlantic contest. The "wise" people grinned and shrugged their shoulders and laughed.

Then suddenly the laughing stopped. The boy had stepped into the plane at San Francisco, whizzed over the Sierras and the Rockies like a comet, and in one jump landed at St. Louis, in the fastest time ever made by an airman flying alone. One more jump and he came down in New York, to find himself besieged by reporters and the populace while his name was on every tongue. From the depths of obscurity he had leaped to the heights of fame. In forty-eight hours he had become the most talked-of person in America.

A few days were spent in preparation, and then he embarked on his great adventure. He shot skyward one morning, winged his way to Newfoundland and then turned the nose of his plane toward the yet unconquered Atlantic. After battling with fog and sleet and storm he swooped down at last on the French capital to find himself the most famous man in the world. This is told of in the first volume of this series, entitled: "Over the Ocean to Paris."

Following his triumphant homecoming and the magnificent ovations accorded him, Ted Scott found more work awaiting him. Terrible Mississippi floods were raging. Ted enlisted in the aviation section of the Red Cross and did heroic work in aiding the sufferers of the stricken districts. Later on, he resumed his work in the Air Service in its most hazardous section, that which involved flights over the Rockies.

The Pacific still remained to conquer and Ted Scott tamed it by making a flight in record time from the Western coast to Hawaii. He learned the force of tropical hurricanes in his search over the West Indies for lost comrades. A flight to Mexico involved capture by and escape from the bandits of that troubled republic. He winged his way to Australia, carrying, as he discovered after he started, a maniac in his plane. He helped the United States Secret Service in breaking up a ring that was smuggling diamonds from Canada over the border. In South America he came in contact with head-hunters and ferocious beasts and reptiles. His thirst for adventure prompted a voyage to the Antarctic, where he made the first air flight over the South Pole.

How he quelled a mutinous outbreak among convicts, how he thwarted the nefarious plot of a band of scoundrels, his daring voyage to the Frozen North in a search for buried nuggets,

the perils he encountered and the obstacles he surmounted in that dangerous adventure are narrated in the immediately preceding volume of this series, entitled: "Through the Air to Alaska."

Now to return to Ted Scott in the Bromville street as he gathers himself for a spring upon the fleeing rascal.

A quick glance over his shoulder told the fugitive that the young airman was close upon his heels. Capture was imminent. In desperation he put on a final burst of speed.

It availed him nothing, however, except to defer the clash for a moment, for Ted would not be denied.

The man turned and made as though to draw a weapon. Before he could carry out his design, Ted Scott's fist shot out and caught him a terrific clip on the jaw.

Down went the man to the ground, with Ted, unable to check the speed at which he was traveling, going down on top of him.

The shock of the fall tore the bundle of papers from the man's hand and sent them flying into the middle of the street.

Instantly the young aviator sprang to his feet and, leaving his prostrate opponent, rushed to the papers and pounced upon them.

That is, the bulk of them, for some of them had been shaken apart from others in the fall and were being blown about the street.

Darting here and there, Ted retrieved the errant sheets until all had been accounted for.

It was the work of but a few seconds, for the young aviator worked with feverish haste. Yet those few seconds had been sufficient to enable the robber to make his escape.

For when Ted, half expecting an attack from the rear, whirled about, the man was running down the street, his fast-vanishing form merging itself with the darkness.

Ted Scott's first impulse was to pursue. But he checked himself. He had achieved his main purpose, the recovery of the papers. The capture of the man was comparatively unimportant, though he would have liked to put the rascal behind the bars. Besides, there was the first robber yet to be dealt with, the one he had left half-choked on the floor of the hotel office.

This last thought decided him and, holding the precious papers tightly, the young airman turned and raced toward home.

CHAPTER III

DANGER BREWING

WHEN Ted Scott reached the veranda of the Bromville House, winded but happy in the recovery of the description and designs of the new plane, he saw that there was a light in the office.

"Whole place roused, no doubt," he thought. "No wonder. We must have made plenty of noise in that scuffle."

Ted entered the office so silently that for a moment the two men bending over the safe were unaware of his presence. He heard Walter Hapworth say excitedly:

"The designs of the new plane are gone, Mr. Browning! You can see for yourself!"

Eben nodded in perplexed and worried confirmation.

"The money has not been touched, though it is in plain sight. Only your packet of papers, as you say, has disappeared. It is easy enough, from that fact, to reconstruct the motive of the robbery."

"Easier still, to provide the cure!" remarked Ted Scott from the doorway.

The two men whirled to confront him. Walter's face was grim and his finger curled about the trigger of an automatic pistol.

"Don't shoot!" grinned Ted. "I'll stand and deliver."

In pity for Hapworth's state of mind, the young airman produced the recovered documents at once.

The young man pounced upon them, grabbed them from Ted's hand with scant ceremony, and examined them eagerly to make sure that none was missing. Reassured on this point, he glanced at Ted questioningly.

"Now, young fellow, come clean," he said. "From the sounds we have heard we can guess that things have been stirring about this office. Also, your own appearance bears evidence of conflict. With the papers once more safe in my grasp, I can afford to ask: How come?"

Eben, whose eyes had not left Ted since the latter's dramatic entrance, asked anxiously,

"You're not badly hurt, are you, Ted? Your lip's bleeding and you look considerably bunged up."

"You should see the other fellows," Ted reassured him. "One of them will bear the marks of my fingers on his throat for a long time, or I miss my guess, and I bet the other is minus a couple of front teeth."

Walter glanced down at Ted's right hand.

"Your knuckles are skinned," he remarked.

Ted grinned.

"I had no time to put on gloves. Now sit down, both of you, and I'll tell you what happened."

Through Ted's graphic description, Eben Browning and Walter Hapworth were made to see again that scene in the office, the man working stealthily at the safe, Ted's swift approach, the subsequent scuffle, the appearance of the accomplice and his nearly successful theft of the precious documents concerning the new plane.

"My long legs turned the trick," Ted finished, modestly. "I outran the fellow. If I had once lost sight of him in those dark streets, the story would have had a different ending."

"A bad ending for me," agreed Walter, thoughtfully. "This night's work, if successfully carried out by the thieves, would have meant the possible ruin of my plans in connection with the new plane, or at least their indefinite postponement. You have done me an inestimable favor, Ted. I suppose there's no use trying to thank you."

"Forget it," begged Ted, uncomfortably. "While your papers were in the safe there, Eben and I were morally responsible for their safe keeping. As for the scrap, well, I enjoyed that! By the way," he looked about him as though for the first time conscious of something missing, "what became of that fellow?"

"What fellow?" asked Hapworth and Eben together.

"The man I throttled." Ted continued to look about him as though he half expected to discover the fellow hiding behind a table or a chair. "I left him lying here on the floor about half-way between the safe and the desk."

Walter shook his head.

"There was no one in the office when I switched on the light. The fellow must have recovered while Mr. Browning and I were colliding with each other on the stairs and made his escape before we reached the office."

He turned to Eben.

"You didn't see anyone, did you, Mr. Browning?"

"No, I'm sure the office was empty when we switched on the light."

"Too bad," said Ted regretfully. "I thought that fellow would stay choked for a while. If we had him here, we might make him talk."

"You're right," said Hapworth, grimly. "For instance, we might induce him to tell who sent him here, and why. I have considerable curiosity to know the name of his employer."

From the safe, whose contents he was examining with painstaking care, Eben suggested:

"Why not notify the police? They'll catch your thieves for you."

"Maybe," Hapworth returned slowly. He

appeared to consider the suggestion, frowning down at the papers in his hand. "I don't think I'll call in the police at all," he said, finally. "Chances are they would apprehend the scoundrels and find out who put them up to this thievish business, which, of course, would be all to the good. On the other hand, such a course would turn the floodlights of publicity upon this project of mine which I have done my best to keep as secret as possible. The last thing I want right now is publicity. No, I think, if it is all the same to you, we will keep the police out of it."

Some argument was needed to win Eben to this point of view. Now that the office safe had proven so vulnerable, he felt an added need of police protection. Ted finally won Eben over by pointing out that the theft had, without doubt, been aimed at Hapworth, with the procuring of data concerning the new plane as its object.

"The thieves were not after money. There was plenty of it in plain sight in the safe, yet they left that alone and grabbed for Walter's packet of papers. I don't think we need fear any further attempt, especially as the scoundrels must know that Walter is on his guard now and will not leave the papers a second time in the same place."

"For the rest of the night I will sleep with them under my pillow," said Walter grimly.

"After that, I think I'll hang them in a bag about my neck."

"Might be a good idea," Ted laughed. "In the meantime, what do you say we turn in? I could do with a little sleep, myself."

The others agreed and, after making a round of the house outside and in, to make sure that no one lurked about the premises, they carefully closed and locked the safe and went up to bed.

Nothing further happened to disturb them that night, but in the morning Walter Hapworth received word from his Detroit manager that increased his uneasiness.

They were at breakfast when the letter, among others, was handed to him. Hapworth glanced over it, frowning, then passed it to Ted.

"Read for yourself," he invited.

Ted Scott scanned the letter hastily and his face became grave.

"Several suspicious characters have been seen hanging about this end of the plant," the young flyer read from the letter.

"The section reserved for the erection of the new plane," Walter explained, and Ted nodded.

"I am practically certain that there is some sort of conspiracy afoot," the Detroit manager wrote. "I would feel much better if you were on the ground here to take charge of this situ-

ation yourself. Won't you come to Detroit at once?" "

Ted glanced up from the letter.

"Looks pretty serious," he commented.

"After what happened here last night," returned Walter, "I am inclined to think it is serious. I am going to Detroit at once." He half rose as he spoke, and Charity put out a detaining hand.

"You are not going until you have had a second cup of coffee! Sit down and let me pour it for you."

Hapworth assented with a pleasant smile for Charity. It was evident to Ted, however, that the young man's thoughts were already in Detroit, hovering anxiously about that section of the plant that housed the secret plane.

Walter looked at his watch.

"I may be able to get that nine-thirty train——"

"Why figure on trains," Ted interrupted, "when I can run you to Detroit in the plane in a half or a third the time?"

Walter accepted the suggestion eagerly.

"That's great, Ted! The sooner the better. I've a hunch there's no time to be lost, if I hope to preserve the secret of the new plane."

"O.K. That's settled then."

"How soon can we start?"

"Whenever you say. We'll stop just long enough to throw a few things in a bag and be

off. The old plane itself is in great shape; ready to take the air at a moment's notice."

"Fine! Ted, this is great of you. It's a lifesaver. I can't tell you how grateful——"

"Forget it! Don't you suppose I expect to get some fun out of it?"

Walter looked suddenly grim.

"Well, I think I can promise you some excitement at the end of the trip, anyway!"

At the flying field, Jackson, Ted's mechanic, approached the young flyer.

"Your plane's O.K., Mr. Scott. I've just given it a thorough going over to make sure. You needn't worry."

Something in the man's tone made Ted look at him sharply.

"Why should I worry?" he asked. "The plane was in fine shape yesterday. What could have happened in the night to hurt it?"

"Yeah," said the mechanic with significant emphasis, "that's what I wanted to find out!"

CHAPTER IV

ON THE WING

"COME, speak out!" cried Ted Scott to his mechanic, alarmed by the man's mysterious manner. "Has anything happened to the plane, Jackson?"

The mechanic scratched his head and grinned.

"It's O.K., like I told you. But when I came on the field this morning the watchman told me that there'd been a funny looking tramp hanging about this shed last night. The feller looked harmless enough, but when he took to hanging about so long the watchman got his mad up and shooed him off. That's why I gave your plane the once-over, Mr. Scott. I wanted to be sure there wasn't no damage done."

"Thanks. Much obliged, Jackson," said Ted, and dodged inside the shed.

He did not pause to comment upon the mechanic's story until every screw and valve and wire of the precious plane had been examined and found in good condition. Then, a hand resting on one of the sturdy wings, he turned to Walter.

"The plot thickens," he remarked. "Also, the suspicious characters are not all in Detroit! What do you think of Jackson's tramp story, Walter?"

Hapworth shrugged.

"What can I think? This vagrant may have been a harmless fellow, looking for a night's shelter."

"Or?" Ted suggested.

Again Walter shrugged.

"I know that you are thinking, of course, that he may have had some connection with the safe robbery at the Bromville House last night."

"It's possible the thieves may have planned a getaway by plane," Ted suggested, "and they planted one of their pals here to clear the road for them."

"And incidentally damage your plane so you couldn't give chase!"

Ted laughed.

"We've built up a pretty good case against the tramp, who may have been, as you say, only a harmless fellow looking for a night's shelter. Nevertheless," he added, a shade grimly, "I'm glad the night watchman was on the job!"

The plane, wheeled out into the sunshine of the field, made a brave showing. As always, Ted Scott was proud of her perfection of line, the broad spread of her wings. He knew that

her engines were sound, those same engines that had carried him safely through many dangerous adventures and that would, he confidently expected, carry him through many more.

He waved to the crowd that surrounded the plane and nodded to Walter.

They climbed aboard and at Ted's lifted hand one of the mechanics stepped forward and gave the propeller a whirl.

"Thanks!" yelled Ted, above the sudden roar of the motor.

The weather was perfect for flying. There was scarcely any wind. The sky was a brilliant blue and flecked with feathery clouds. Even those treacherous air pockets, that are the bane of all flyers, seemed miraculously absent.

Ted was enjoying himself thoroughly when Walter Hapworth reminded him that they had seen no papers that morning.

"Better land at the next town and get a flock of morning papers," he suggested. "There should be news of the *Mercury*."

Ted nodded and a short time later brought the plane to a landing on Perry field, just outside the town of Perryville. Ted remained with the plane while Walter went off in search of the morning papers.

The latter returned a few minutes later, laden with them. He handed one to Ted, while

he himself scanned the first page of another.

The departure of the great dirigible, *Mercury*, occupied a prominent place on the front page of all the morning newspapers. There was a picture of the enormous ship and a detailed description of her, including several interior views.

"She's a beauty," Ted remarked. "Imagine the labor and the ingenuity that go into the making of a monster aircraft like that!"

"It's hard to imagine," Hapworth responded soberly. "It's almost beyond imagination. Why, the *Mercury* provides the first really luxurious air travel for passengers."

"Look at that lounge!" cried Ted, as he pored over the pictures of the interior of the monster dirigible. "Some sixty by thirty feet, filled with wicker furniture and all the other comforts of home. Thousands of feet in the air at that!"

"This dirigible's a double-decker, too. Look at this promenade deck, Ted! Surrounded, or, at least, bounded on one side by unsplinterable glass windows through which passengers can look down at the view."

"It makes me long to get aboard her," Ted said. "She is a regular flying hotel."

"There are comforts and conveniences that air travel has never known before," Walter agreed. "You see, the *Mercury* is run by heavy oil-burning motors. This greatly re-

duces the danger of fire. Also the living quarters, cabins and lounges, are heated."

"I wonder how they do that."

"Oh, it's simple enough, really," Walter explained. "You see, air is drawn in by an electric fan and automatically heated by passing across the face of the engine radiators."

"That's ingenuity for you!" cried Ted, enthusiastically. "You will be telling me next that they can give the passengers cool air in hot weather."

"Nothing simpler," replied Walter, enjoying his young companion's interest. "In warm weather the radiator is lowered outside the ship, so that cooled air can be supplied to the passengers."

Ted Scott whistled incredulously.

"Sounds like a fish story."

"Whereas it is only a dirigible story, and every word true. Look at the lines of her, Ted. Sweet, aren't they?"

"I should say yes! Beautifully proportioned, too. Look at the length of her. Over seven hundred feet!"

"And over one hundred and thirty feet, maximum diameter. She's a monster, all right, a monster ship with all the comforts of a hotel or an exclusive club. And the perfection of mechanical detail is almost incredible. The engineers have turned out a sweet job in this ship."

"They would," Ted nodded. "I'd like just one look at those oil motors."

"One of the most interesting features of the ship," Walter went on, "is the ingenuity with which her builders have selected only the lightest of materials for her construction.

"In the galley aluminum and duralumin are being used in the cooking apparatus, replacing steel and iron. Balsa wood, one of the lightest woods known, has gone into the making of the ornamental columns."

"Yes, I've read about that," Ted said. "The cabin walls are made of fire-proofed canvas, interlined with some other material. They have thought of every way to lighten the weight of the ship, except one."

"And what's that?" asked Walter, interested.

"They should make it a rule that all passengers must diet for at least thirty days before date of sailing," grinned Ted. "That should cut off quite a few pounds."

Walter chuckled, then roared. The idea appealed to him immensely.

"We might suggest it to the management," he said.

The young airman continued for some time to contemplate the marvelous construction of the giant dirigible, commenting with enthusiasm upon the many interesting mechanical features.

"To carry so many tons of fuel they must need a number of tanks," Ted remarked.

"There are thirty-eight main tanks," Walter pointed out, "and eleven compensating tanks to be used when they are not carrying the usual number of passengers."

"It says here," said Ted, pointing to the paper, "that some of the main tanks have been constructed so that the bottom can be cut away."

"Something like opening a tin can," remarked Walter, with a laugh. "All joking aside, though, that feature may come in well in case of emergency."

"The builders have thought of everything," said Ted. "I wager I could wander over that craft for a solid week and not learn all I'd like to know about it. The lower deck, for instance, with its smoke room, wireless and chart rooms must be mighty interesting."

"The galley and crew's quarters are down there, too," Walter pointed out. "And the control car, as you see, is outside the main body of the ship. Imagine the materials needed," he went on, "for the building of such a gigantic ship. I understand there are several miles of metal tubing, between sixty and seventy thousand bolts and nuts and some six hundred thousand rivets."

"Stop!" cried Ted. "I'm getting dizzy. What a ship! I'd give about anything I own

to have my name on the passenger list."

"Speaking of the passenger list," said Walter. "I see that both Paul Monet and Steve Williams are among those on board. Looks as if he had straightened out that patent rights tangle; otherwise he would not be leaving on the *Mercury*. Still, he should have sent me some word. A cablegram would have set my mind at rest."

"Probably you will find one waiting for you at Detroit," Ted suggested. "Better stow the papers and hop off, Walter. We're losing time."

Hapworth agreed with alacrity and a few minutes later they found themselves in the air again, speeding toward Detroit.

Weather conditions had changed for the worse, however, during their discussion concerning the *Mercury*. Clouds had piled up in the sky, while vague rumblings of thunder presaged a storm.

Ted increased the speed of the *Lightning Streak*, hoping to outdistance the storm. The moisture-laden clouds were swifter than he, however. They banked up about him until he was riding through a thick, clammy fog. The moisture clung to the plane, running down the wings in tiny rivulets. Ted's goggles were filmed, so that he had repeatedly to clear them in order to see ahead.

Now and then the fog was split by flashes

of light. The thunder was heavier, the lightning flares more vivid. With the storm tagging close at his heels, Ted had no alternative but to fly straight forward and hope for the best.

Then the storm, almost tropical in its violence, broke. It lifted the plane and whirled it about. It flashed lightning about the ship until it was bathed in a ghastly green glare. It flung thunderbolts through the fog until the aviators were deafened, their eardrums ringing from the crashing impact.

Through this pandemonium Ted drove with steady nerves, his muscles taut to meet emergency. Unless the lightning found a target in the plane, he thought, there was more than an even chance of winning through.

Suddenly the plane was caught up by some invisible force, hung for a breathless moment, then plunged downward as though shot from the mouth of a gun!

CHAPTER V

CLOSE TO DISASTER

THAT swift plunge downward had a nightmare unreality. For a few desperate seconds the plane was completely out of control. Not having gained great altitude in the first place, Ted Scott knew that he must check the descent and quickly if he hoped to avert a tragedy.

He braced himself to wrestle with the plane. Little by little he drew her up until she was riding level not more than a hundred feet above the ground.

The plane wobbled drunkenly, not yet fully under control. Blinded by his steaming glasses and the rain that fell in solid sheets, the young pilot could see for only a short distance ahead. He had no way of telling at what moment the plane, driven blindly, might plunge into a group of trees or some other obstruction.

He tried to gain altitude, and the plane responded gallantly, though slowly.

Ted rubbed his goggles impatiently, strained his eyes to see ahead. Slowly the plane lifted, battling the gale of wind. The young pilot drove her steadily forward, striving to see.

Suddenly the fog lifted and revealed a terrifying sight. Straight ahead of them was a heavy growth of timber, the trees rising straight and tall toward the sky.

There was no time to land, even if a suitable place could be found. There was no time to turn. The one chance was to gain altitude swiftly and skim the tops of the trees.

"One chance in a hundred," the young aviator told himself and set the plane to her almost impossible task.

The plane was speeding ahead at a rapid rate and gaining altitude, but not fast enough. The trees leaned toward it, bent forward by the wind. It seemed to the young pilot that they were maliciously beckoning him on, luring the plane to sure destruction.

Ted measured the distance with his eyes and felt that he and his companion were doomed. The treetops were far above, the phalanx of their trunks and lower branches perilously close.

The machine gained altitude slowly under the terrific down-beat of the wind. In another moment it seemed that it must crash!

His hand still steady on the stick, his eyes seeking desperately for some way out of their predicament, Ted Scott thought he saw a ray of hope.

A lightning flash revealed a gap in the apparently solid mass of trees. The trunks grew

farther apart. Yes, it was a small clearing. There was a chance—a bare chance. It would take almost supernatural skill to steer through that opening, but——

With a defiant roar the *Lightning Streak* headed for the opening. His brain cool, his heart intrepid, his nerve iron, Ted Scott lifted her through.

Branches snapped, boughs reached out to grapple, but, guided by a master hand, the *Lightning Streak* drove on, its engine singing a song of triumph.

Up and up, amid crackling twigs and swishing foliage, avoiding miraculously the stouter obstructions, up from the jailor trees to the freedom of the sky!

Ted Scott threw his shoulders back and drew a long breath. He knew that the plane had been scraped, perhaps slightly damaged, to what extent he could not tell. It was enough for him at the moment to know from her behavior that she was still airworthy. He thrilled with jubilation at their escape from what had seemed certain disaster. He looked around and grinned at Walter, who shook hands with himself as a sign of admiration for the young aviator's work.

Having gained altitude, they ran into rain and wind again, but this time Ted was able to avoid the worst of it by climbing still higher.

The remainder of the journey to Detroit was

uneventful, and when they landed at the flying field just outside the city, they found the usual crowd of people waiting for them. News had flashed ahead that Ted Scott was bound for Detroit and all in the vicinity of the flying field who could possibly be there were on hand to welcome him.

He brought the plane to a successful standstill, waved to the crowd, submitted to a photograph or two, and then anxiously examined his plane.

One wing was slightly damaged and there were other minor injuries.

"Anything serious?" asked Walter, bending over to examine the damaged wing.

"Luckily, not. We're in luck, all right. It's a wonder the plane wasn't ripped to pieces."

"It would have been, with any one but Ted Scott at the controls," commented Walter. "That was inspired work, Ted. It was almost worth the risk to see you pull that plane out of the trees. How you did it is still a mystery to me."

"We got a lucky break," Ted insisted. "Nothing but that gap in the trees saved us from a crash."

Walter laughed and shrugged.

"Have it your own way. Nothing you can say about luck will change my opinion of what got us out of that tough spot."

Ted said he would stay with the plane, see

her safely housed and give orders for the necessary repair work on her while Walter went on up to the office.

"I know you are anxious to have a pow-wow with your men," he said. "I'll see you later."

"Meet me for dinner," Walter suggested. "I will probably have plenty to tell you by then."

However, when Ted Scott met Walter Hapworth in a quiet restaurant in the downtown district, he found that his friend had little to add to the information contained in the letter from his manager.

"There seems to be little doubt that a determined effort is being made to steal the secret of the new plane." Walter's face was serious as he leaned across the table toward Ted. "Naturally it requires little imagination to deduce that this is the work of a rival manufacturer, who hopes by unscrupulous means to get possession of my secret and turn it to profit for himself."

"What makes you so sure that some one is after the secret?" Ted asked.

"There is no longer any doubt on that point," said Hapworth, with a worried frown. "Twice guards have frustrated attempts to break into that part of the plant where the new plane is being built.

"Even more serious than that was an attempt to bribe one of my men, a trusted me-

chanic who, necessarily, is familiar with most of the unique features of the plane."

"And the mechanic?"

"Was not to be bribed. He proved his integrity by reporting the matter at once to the manager, who, in turn, has passed the information on to me."

"It must be a pretty unscrupulous firm that would try to get information in that way," remarked Ted.

"And all the more dangerous for being unscrupulous," Walter pointed out. "For the present, I've doubled the guards at the plant and warned the men against getting into conversation with strangers. If I could do more, I would."

"Probably that will be enough," Ted reassured him. "Being forewarned is half the battle. These mysterious enemies of yours will get tired butting their heads against a stone wall after a while and will decide to leave you alone."

"I only hope you are right," said Walter with a doubtful shake of the head. "But I don't mind admitting to you that I'm glad to be on the ground here where I can keep a personal eye on the plant. I shall feel better still when the plane is assembled and ready for a test."

"I'm anxious to see it," said Ted.

"So you shall. In the morning, if you like. I'd like your opinion on it."

"It's yours for what it's worth," said Ted. "And you can't start too early in the morning to suit me."

After that the conversation turned to pleasanter things. Walter had found a cablegram from Steve Williams waiting for him at the office. The message merely said "Everything O. K.," but its very brevity was reassuring.

"With the patent rights in our hands," said Walter, "the most serious stumbling block will be removed. We will rush the construction of the plane. As for this conspiracy, that's a different matter, of course. But I think we can handle that all right."

On this note of optimism they parted, promising to meet early the following morning at the main office of the plant. Walter, who had taken and furnished an apartment in Detroit, wanted Ted to go home with him, but the latter refused on the ground that he had already secured a room in a hotel where he would be closer to the plant.

"I may stay two days or two weeks," he explained. "Since my plans are so uncertain, I think I'd be better off in a hotel, thanks just the same."

Such was Ted's eagerness to view the new plane that he was on the ground ahead of Walter the following morning. He had made friends with the mechanics at the plant, some of whom knew him personally and all of whom

knew him by reputation, when Walter arrived.

"I see I won't have to introduce you," laughed the latter. "Well, what do you say, Ted? Shall we go straight to the construction shed?"

"Sure thing," replied the young airman. "I'm filled to the brim with curiosity. Have been cudgeling my brain to figure out how you're going to apply the helicopter principle to the plane."

"Come along and we'll show you," promised Walter.

CHAPTER VI

THE SECRET PLANE

AN EXCLAMATION of surprise came from Ted Scott when his eyes rested on an entirely novel combination of wires, wing, and engine.

"By the great horn spoon!" he exclaimed. "I thought I'd seen every kind of plane under the sun; but I've never seen anything of this kind before."

"Of course you haven't," replied Walter Hapworth, gratified at the sensation he was causing. "Neither has anyone else, except the builders. It's my new baby and, like all fathers, I'm mighty proud of it."

"Not such a beauty to look at, as one sometimes says of a kid," observed Thompson, the foreman, who was with them; "but it has a sweet disposition."

"Four wings instead of two!" exclaimed Ted, struck by a salient feature of the plane.

"Yes," said Hapworth. "As you see, they're mounted at right angles to each other and revolve in a horizontal plane. They are worked by means of four four-bladed propellers, one to each wing, mounted forward of the

leading edge about ten feet from the center of the machine."

"How are the propellers driven?" asked Ted, curiously.

"Through a gear and shaft arrangement from a central air-cooled engine, which is mounted horizontally with the propeller shaft pointing upward," put in Thompson, whose pride in the novel construction was quite as keen as that of his employer.

"Outriggers on which elevators or tail surfaces are mounted are attached to each of the wings," said Hapworth. "We call these surfaces 'stabovators,' and each has an area of about thirteen square feet."

"I see," said Ted, whose quick mind grasped immediately the significance of these devices. "It works out, then, that each of the four units is arranged as a small airplane, consisting of a power-driven wing with a tail which controls the angle of incidence of the wing with which it is connected."

"Exactly," assented Hapworth. "I might have known you'd see the point in a flash. You see, the stabovators are operated by the control stick. For rising or descending they are operated together by a lever at the left of the pilot's seat."

"Looks as though you'd installed a powerful engine," remarked Ted, turning his attention to that important feature of the plane.

"We have," declared Hapworth. "It has over four hundred horsepower and makes twenty-one hundred revolutions a minute. It'll make things hum when it gets going at full speed."

"What speed do you expect to make?" queried Ted.

"Probably seventy miles an hour at the outset," replied Hapworth. "You see, we haven't made any especial attempt to get record speed, or anything like that. The same is true about load carrying capacity. All that we care to demonstrate now is that the principle is sound and that the machine will work. Once prove that, and all the rest is a matter of detail."

"True enough," agreed Ted. "How are you going to keep the engine cool? I should think that would have been one of your toughest problems. You see, with the ordinary plane we have the cooling effect of the slipstream. But with the engine working in an unusual position as in this plane, you don't have the benefit of that."

"It has proved a tough nut to crack," admitted Hapworth, "but we think we've done it."

He pointed to a two-bladed, horizontal, metal fan, about three feet and a half in diameter.

"You see that fan?" he said. "It's rotated at crankshaft speed to act as a means of cooling the engine cylinders and the oil. Then

there are special oil coolers located between each cylinder."

"Ingenious," commented Ted, "but to operate the fan uses up considerable of your precious horsepower."

"Not so much," observed Thompson. "We've found that about fourteen horsepower is all that is needed for it."

"Here's the fuselage," said Hapworth, putting his hand on a small car suspended beneath the four wings. "Like everything else in the machine, we've tried to make it strong and light at the same time. It's built up with a fabric-covered, light, tubular framework. You see, the pilot's cockpit is located at the forward end with a seat for a passenger or mechanic at the rear. If the pilot happens to be traveling alone, it will be necessary to carry a weight corresponding to that of an extra man to preserve the correct fore-and-aft balance of the machine."

"Take a squint at the fuel tank," interposed Thompson, pointing it out. "It's made of aluminum, located in the fuselage, and revolves with the vertical shaft. The oil is carried in a tank just below the engine."

"Yes," said Ted. "But here's one thing that looks familiar. I see that you stick to the conventional type stick and rudder bar."

"We do," replied Hapworth. "But their use is conditioned by the peculiar construction

of the helicopter. Since the body is free to rotate about the central axis, the balanced rudder is pivoted about a horizontal axis instead of a vertical, so that if you turn the car to the left, the left rudder inclines the wing so that the air from above strikes it on the left side causing the nose of the car to swing toward the left."

For nearly an hour the discussion continued, often on a technical plane that could be understood only by experts.

"You've rung the bell, Walter," Ted finally declared, turning toward his friend. "You've perfected a machine that will startle the aviation world and perhaps revolutionize the industry."

"Of course, it won't be perfect on the first attempt," cautioned Thompson.

"Certainly not," agreed Hapworth. "Some of the theories embodied in it are so new that they've never been put to an actual test. We'll find things here and there that will have to be modified and corrected. That's true of all inventions, doubly true of so complicated a thing as this. What I feel convinced of is that I have a machine that will dispense with runways, rise straight up in the air, hover indefinitely over a given spot, come down as vertically as it went up and move horizontally at a sufficient speed."

At the plant the progress of the *Mercury* was being followed with the greatest interest. The

first radio reports showed her to be making fair progress, though a later and rather disquieting report told of trouble with her engines.

This did not seriously alarm either Hapworth or Ted. Some trouble was to be expected on the maiden trip of the great dirigible. That she would make the trip in safety, they did not seriously doubt.

However, when messages from the great air liner mysteriously ceased a day or two later, the young airmen felt they had cause for serious uneasiness.

"Her engines may be causing her trouble," said Walter, discussing the matter with Ted Scott. "But it seems incredible that her wireless should be out of commission as well. I can't understand this mysterious silence, and I don't like it."

It was of this conversation that Ted was thinking when he left the plant one evening just on the edge of dusk. Walter had offered to give him a lift in the car, but Ted had refused, pleading a need for fresh air and a little brisk exercise.

"I think I'll walk part of the way, at least. See you again to-morrow."

However, upon leaving the plant Ted Scott did not turn his steps directly toward town but swung out into the country instead. So pre-occupied was he with his thoughts that he found he had left the plant far behind and woke

up eventually to find himself on a narrow winding road in a part of the country that was totally unfamiliar to him.

He was about to turn back when a name, spoken by some one he could not see, caught his startled attention.

"Hapworth ain't so smart as he thinks he is. We'll cook his goose to-night, all right!"

Ted looked about for the speaker, but realized that the fellow must be hidden by a clump of shrubbery close to the road. He stood still, making himself as much a part of the shadows as possible, hoping to hear more of a conversation that suddenly had the keenest interest for him.

"What's the idea?" asked a second voice, gruffly.

"Come along to the shack," was the reply. "I'll tell you there."

There was the sound of footsteps moving away from the listener. Cautiously, Ted Scott left the road and followed.

CHAPTER VII

RASCALLY PLOTTERS

HIS mysterious guides led Ted Scott along a narrow path across property that would soon be snapped up by real estate dealers in the vicinity and transformed into handsome suburban estates. Just at the moment it seemed lonely and abandoned enough and Ted wondered to what hangout of thieves and desperadoes he was being led.

His curiosity was soon gratified. The shadowy figures leading the way stopped suddenly. Ted stopped, too, watching from the shadow of a sheltering tree.

He saw the vague outline of a dilapidated building in the clearing, and as he watched a faint light sprang up in it. One of the men stepped forward and delivered a resounding knock on the ramshackle door. From within, a gruff voice growled:

"Come in and stop that racket. Want to rouse the neighborhood, do you?"

When the newcomers had entered the shack and the door was shut again, Ted Scott advanced cautiously. The knowledge that, by an

incredible stroke of good fortune, he had stumbled upon a plot concerning Walter Hapworth excited and exhilarated him. He was anxious to lose no word of the conversation.

He approached the shack quietly and felt his way along the outer wall until he reached the window. He saw that the light was made by one half-burned candle set in a stained pie plate.

The pie plate was set in the center of a rough board table, about which was gathered as villainous a group of scoundrels as Ted had ever seen. They conversed in low tones, and the young aviator found to his intense disappointment that he could not hear a word of what was said.

He would have to get closer; but how?

A quick survey of the shack led him to believe that it was composed of two rooms, not counting a shedlike projection that had been built on at the back. Perhaps there was a back door. So he found his way around to the back of the shack and there found the door he was hoping for.

"More luck," he thought. "Now, if it is only unlocked!"

The door yielded to his pressure, grating a little on rusty hinges. He stood for a long moment, listening. There was no sudden sound from within the shack. Evidently no one had noticed the opening of the door.

Emboldened, Ted entered the place and crept carefully over the rotting boards of the floor until he reached the wall. Again he listened, his ear pressed close against the flimsy partition.

It was still impossible to hear everything that was said in that other room, for the conspirators were careful to keep their voices lowered. However, Ted could catch a phrase now and then and it was possible from these to guess at the gist of the discourse.

"We've got to get inside that construction shed," said the man who had first mentioned Hapworth's name. "We've been foolin' around about it long enough. The boss is gettin' sore."

Here Ted redoubled his efforts to hear plainly. If he could learn the name of the "boss" he would be in a position to pass on some really useful information to Walter.

However, neither then, nor at any other time, did he hear the real name of the "boss." Evidently the rascally conspirators had been well primed.

"Sure the boss is gettin' sore," drawled another voice. "But I'd like to know what we're goin' to do about it. That plane is guarded like the baby of a millionaire."

"And now they've doubled the guards," growled another. "We ain't got no more chance of gettin' inside that construction shed

than Red has of passin' himself off as a college president."

"Listen!" said the first speaker. He was angry and for the moment forgot to lower his voice. Ted could hear him quite plainly. "We're goin' to put this through. We've got to. The boss is payin' us enough so we ought to be willin' to put our backs into it. I have a plan, if you stiff's'll keep still long enough for me to tell you."

"Keep your shirt on, Red," growled one of the men. "We're listenin'."

"Shoot!" commanded a second.

The man called Red lowered his voice, to the intense annoyance of Ted Scott, listening with his ear glued against the thin partition. Again he could catch only occasional phrases.

"Watchman—keys to the construction shed—easiest thing in the world. Use watchman's cap."

From which Ted gathered that the plan was to overpower the watchman, steal his keys and cap, whereupon one of them, impersonating the watchman, would boldly unlock the doors of the construction shed, thus paving the way for the more stealthy approach of his confederates.

This plan did not meet with the unqualified approval of Red's associates.

"The guard's been doubled," growled one of them. "How about the others?"

Red grunted.

"I have other bozos lookin' after them."

There was a sinister quality in his tone that chilled Ted's blood. He stood still, listening with an almost painful intentness. Red was speaking again. He had raised his voice so that Ted could catch the words.

"We ain't takin' no chances this time. We won't find no diagrams in the construction shed and we can't very well carry the plane away. So I've thought up a plan that's sure to work."

He paused and one of the men said in a surly voice:

"All right. Shoot!"

"I got a photographer to work for us."

Ted started and his coat sleeve rubbed against the wall. At the same time a board cracked under his foot as he shifted his weight.

One of the men cried sharply:

"What's that?"

"Nothin' but rats," came Red's deep growl. "Shacks crawlin' with 'em." Then, after a brief pause, mockingly: "What's the matter, Bill? You losin' your nerve?"

"Losin' my nerve, nothin'! There's some one in this joint, that's what. Didn't sound like no rats to me. I'm going to look."

There was the sound of a chair scraping across the floor and Ted Scott started precipitately for the back door.

His retreat was arrested by the sound of Red's voice, saying harshly:

“Sit down, you rat! This ain’t no time to go humorin’ your nerves. We got important business. You goin’ to sit down or have I got to make you?”

There was a sullen mutter from the man called Bill, the sound of a chair being drawn up to the table. Evidently, Red was the kind who stood for no nonsense and his cronies knew it.

Relieved, the young airman once more put his ear to the wall, careful this time to let no creaking board betray him.

“This guy’s a good photographer. He can take pictures, see, and the boss was willin’ to stake him to a camera and some films.”

“What’s all that for?” growled another voice. “We ain’t needin’ a camera in this racket.”

“That’s all you know, you fathead,” sneered Red. “If you was to shut up and listen, you might learn somethin’. This here feller with the camera, he’s goin’ to make pictures of this here mystery plane. He’ll take it from a lot of different angles, y’understand, and when we turn them films over to the boss and his gang of experts, he’s goin’ to know as much about the mystery plane as Hapworth does himself. Is it a swell idea, or ain’t it?”

There was a murmur of tepid approval.

“Who’s this photographer and where is he?” one of them wanted to know. “If he’s so good

takin' pictures, what's he doin' in on a racket like this?"

"This guy's a gin hound, see? He got to drinkin' too heavy and now he's down and out, glad to make a dollar any way he can. But he can take pictures all right, and the boss he's ready to pay handsome for some of this here airplane. Anyways, there's the dope. Now we've got to map out the details."

For more than an hour Ted Scott remained in his cramped position, listening. Some of the conversation escaped him, but he heard enough to assure him that the gang leader's plan was ingenious and that it had a good chance of success.

"Unless some one puts a spoke in their wheel," he thought, cautiously shifting his uncomfortable position. "Something tells me I am going to be that somebody!"

At the moment Ted Scott was startled by a soft double knock at the back door of the shack.

CHAPTER VIII

A WILD RIDE

TRAPPED between the mysterious person at the back door of the shack and the group of villainous blackguards in the front room, Ted Scott found himself in a quandary from which it seemed that not even his quick wits could rescue him.

Impossible to dart out the back door past the author of the knock without revealing the fact that someone had been within the shack who had, presumably, overheard the details of Red's plan to steal the secret of the mystery plane!

Impossible to try to escape through the front room since that would be jumping from the frying pan into the fire and would probably land him in the custody of this fellow, Red!

While he was wondering desperately whether there was a window in this room through which he could plunge head-first, the knock was repeated at the back door. Almost simultaneously the door of the inner room opened.

Ted did the only thing it was possible to do. He stood still.

He realized with a surge of elation that the door opened toward him. Fully opened, it would hide him not only from the person at the door but from those within the candle-lit room. As the door opened, the grotesque shadow of a man was flung on the opposite wall of the shack.

"A vicious looking ruffian," thought Ted. "I wish he'd open the door wider."

The wish was granted almost immediately as Red pushed open the door and strode into the room. As he did so, Ted managed to inch along the wall without attracting the gang leader's attention until he was entirely concealed behind the door.

"What incredible luck! Here I am in a position where I can see and hear without being seen or heard."

The gang leader crossed the floor with a quiet tread remarkable in so heavy a man. Before the outer door he paused. In a rough voice, carefully lowered, he asked:

"Who's there?"

"Me," replied the newcomer. "It's me, Edgar Brand."

The man called Red muttered something under his breath and pulled open the door.

Ted had reason now to be thankful for the presence of mind that had prompted him to close the door after him upon entering the shack. That simple omission would have

spelled certain discovery of his presence.

"What'd you come around this way for?" Red demanded angrily. "Didn't you see the light?"

"I ain't blind, am I? Sure I saw the light." The voice of the newcomer was a querulous whine. Through the crack in the door Ted saw that he carried a camera and another box under his arm.

"The photographer," thought Ted. "Gone to the dogs, all right. What a wreck!"

"I got to be careful, ain't I?" the man went on in his thin whine. "That's why I came around to the back door, because it was dark. I don't want to get caught on this job. It don't look any too good to me."

"There's good money in it, if you have nerve enough to go through with it," growled Red. "I don't say you have, see. You don't look to me like you had the nerve of a grasshopper. But if you throw in with us, you've got to do your part, see? I ain't standin' for no funny business!"

When the door of the inner room was shut upon the unsavory pair, Ted wasted no time in getting out of the shack. He felt that he had learned all he needed to concerning the plans of the gang. The leader's instructions to the photographer would probably be only a repetition of what had been already said.

Reaching the shelter of the trees that sur-

rounded and concealed the shack, Ted Scott stood for a moment, wondering what to do with the knowledge he had gained.

His first instinct was to return to the plant as fast as his legs would carry him. The alarm once given, his responsibility would be over and the secret of the mystery plane preserved.

On the other hand, he had no way of telling how far he had come from the plant. He knew that his absorbed meditations had carried him further than he had intended, but whether it was three miles or six, he could not be sure.

Once out on the traveled road, there was a chance that he might pick up a taxi or beg a lift from some passing car. But this was a chance and he told himself impatiently that he could not afford to take chances.

He might walk, in the hope that the villainous plot would not be pulled off for some hours yet, but that also was a chance, he felt, that he could not afford to take.

Gangsters seldom walked these days, he knew, when crime often paid better than good works. Probably Red and his unsavory crew had a car hidden away somewhere in which they could easily pass him, afoot, rendering useless the information he had gathered.

While Ted still debated with himself, he saw the opening of the shack door. He saw the candle blown out and realized with a quickening of all his senses that the great moment was

at hand. He saw shadowy figures emerge from the darkened doorway of the shack, watched them until they disappeared along the woods path that he knew led to the road, then cautiously followed. He trailed the men easily enough, for they were at no great pains to walk softly. He had almost reached the road when the muffled sound of a motor came to his ears.

So they had a car! Ted Scott realized how wise he had been not to set out for the plant on foot. Red and his gang would have passed him easily and he, Ted, would have been powerless to frustrate their plot.

"I'm just as powerless now," the unwelcome thought came to him, "unless I decide what to do and act on it quickly!"

Reaching the edge of the road, he saw that the car was just starting.

Without pausing to consider the possible results of his action, the daring airman dashed out into the road in pursuit of the car.

Luckily for him, the night was dark and the sound of the motor drowned out his running steps. He reached the car and grabbed for the fender. His fingers caught and he swung himself up, clinging like a leech to the back of the machine.

That was a swift ride over bumpy roads. By the time Ted Scott recognized the shadowy outlines of the plant buildings, he was glad enough

to drop from the car and conceal himself behind a shed close to the road.

The machine driven by the gangsters turned off into a side road. Ted guessed it would not go far and was not surprised when a few moments later he saw a shadowy figure emerge from the shelter of the trees and creep furtively down the road in the direction of the construction shed.

“That’s our friend, Red,” he thought. “The others will follow him closely, no doubt. And so will I!”

Ted slipped across the road and trailed the leader of the gang, careful to keep out of sight not only of Red but of his fellow conspirators, who were certain to follow not far behind.

During this stealthy process, the young aviator realized that he had no definite plan of action. Impulse prompted him to leap upon the man, Red, and have it out with him there in the middle of the road.

Common sense, however, told him that this would be foolishly rash and would have little effect beyond ruining any hope he might have of quashing the conspiracy against Walter Hapworth.

Ted Scott knew that he would have to depend upon his wits if he hoped to succeed. He would make no plans. He must wait for the opportune moment. Then he would act!

One by one they passed the buildings of the

plant until they neared the construction shed. No one challenged them. No one appeared to notice the shadowy figures creeping along the side of the road. So far, thought Ted, it had been ridiculously easy.

They reached the construction shed in which the new plane was housed.

Red paused and Ted felt an upward surge of excitement as he, too, paused, staring at that shadowy figure in the road.

CHAPTER IX

WHIRLING FISTS

THE man, Red, glanced furtively over his shoulder.

Ted Scott followed his glance and saw four other shadowy figures creeping up the road close behind him.

On the other side of the road, his face vaguely illuminated by the glow from his pipe, a watchman paced back and forth before the construction shed that housed the mystery plane.

"Only one guard," thought Ted to himself. "The others have probably been attended to by Red's orders or lured away by some fake message. This one has been spared because he carries the keys to the construction shed. Pretty neat!"

The gang leader waited until his confederates had come up to him, then made a sign to them and started across the road.

So stealthy were his movements that the watchman had no inkling of danger until the gangster chief loomed up within three feet of him. Then the watchman whipped his hand to his pocket and started to draw a weapon, but

before he could do so the powerful hand of the thief gripped his arm with a hold of steel.

"None of that," grated Red. "My pals have got you covered. If you make a sound or an ugly move you're a dead man."

But the watchman, himself a powerful man, ignored the threat.

"Let go of me, you rascal," he gritted, "or I'll brain you."

"No back talk," snapped Red. "Hands up, or you'll get yours."

The watchman gave a sudden wrench that freed his hands. With his right fist he swung for the gangster's jaw.

This was the signal for a general mêlée. Red's confederates rushed to the aid of their leader, who had closed with the fiery watchman and was having a hard time of it.

The guardian of the plant fought manfully, swinging his massive fists like flails, but the odds were against him. He was given no chance to draw his weapon, though again and again he tried to reach for it.

He raised his voice and tried to shout for help, only to feel powerful fingers about his throat and hear a voice growl viciously:

"I see I got to finish you."

The butt of a revolver was raised and poised for a crashing blow on the skull. It was a bad moment for the watchman, but as he waited for the impact, fighting furiously though futilely

the while, the revolver was suddenly snatched from his assailant's hand.

A man had dashed into the mêlée, a muscular, magnificently built young fellow, who laid about him with punishing effect while he yelled to comrades to follow his example.

"Come on, boys," shouted the newcomer. "We'll teach these thugs a lesson. Rip into them! Clean them up!"

The watchman, heartened by the unexpected reinforcement, struck out joyfully, and a perfect rain of blows from the pair fell on the disconcerted gangsters.

The effect of the surprise upon them was magical. From Ted's shouts they supposed that they were outnumbered. Panic seized them. A few desultory blows and they turned and fled down the road, with Ted Scott and the watchman in gleeful pursuit.

The rascals reached their car and piled into it helter-skelter. The engine had been kept running, and the car whirled off in a cloud of dust before Ted reached it.

In a moment it had vanished in the darkness and the young aviator, turning back, came face to face with the watchman, who was not as good a sprinter as he was a fighter and had been distanced in the chase.

"They got away, bad cess to them!" muttered the watchman disappointedly, gazing after the car.

"Yes," grinned Ted. "But we've given them something to remember us by."

"Maybe it's a trick," said the watchman, as he turned back. "I must see if there's anyone left hanging about the plant."

"I think they've all gone," Ted reassured him. "I counted them as they tumbled into the car."

The watchman regarded Ted curiously. In the darkness he did not recognize the young flyer. He saw only a tall fellow with tousled hair and powerful hands that closed and unclosed as though they still itched to tackle an enemy.

"You came along all right when you were needed, young fellow," remarked the watchman. He looked about him and added: "But where are the others?"

Ted looked blank for a moment. Then in the darkness he grinned.

"Others? There weren't any others. I'm all there was."

The watchman considered this.

"But you were calling to them all the time: 'Come on, fellows. Let's finish them.' I thought there must be at least a dozen of you."

"So did Red and the gang," laughed Ted. "That was the idea. You see, I had to throw a scare into that bunch of crooks some way. It seemed to me the best way was to make them

think they were outnumbered. It was all I could think of at the time."

"It was enough. Boy, you sure had your nerve with you!"

"You put up a pretty good scrap yourself," Ted complimented him. "Don't know that I've ever seen a better."

"Well, anyway, they didn't get my keys," returned the watchman.

Nearing the construction shed, Ted stumbled over something bulky lying in the middle of the road. He stooped to pick it up and examined it curiously.

"Better look out," said the watchman, peering over his shoulder. "May be a bomb or some contraption of the sort."

"No, it's not a bomb," said Ted slowly, "But it's something that might have proved even more destructive. It's a camera, Mr. ——"

"Moriarty's my name, and at your service. A camera, you say. Well, well! Seems to me a dark night for taking pictures. 'Course, they could use flashlights."

Ted nodded.

"A very dark night, Mr. Moriarty. Did you notice there wasn't any moon? Just the sort of night the crooks would pick for a job like this, and for taking pictures."

Ted threw the camera to the road and

stamped on it. A crunching sound rewarded his efforts. He grinned through the darkness at Mr. Moriarty.

“Want to help?”

Ted and the watchman made a thorough job of wrecking the camera. When they had finished with it and kicked it to one side of the road few would have recognized it for the delicate and perfect piece of mechanism it had once been.

Several lanterns, like gigantic fireflies, swung in the vicinity of the construction shed. Evidently other watchmen at the plant, roused by the sound of shouts, had come to find out the cause.

Ted paused and held out his hand.

“I guess you won’t have any more trouble to-night, Mr. Moriarty. I’m off.”

“I say, young feller, what’s your hurry?”

“I haven’t had any dinner and I’m as hungry as a wolf. I’m going on the trail of a ham sandwich and a cup of coffee.”

“But look here, I don’t even know your name!”

Ted grinned to himself as he started away from the plant on a run.

“I’m Ted Scott,” he called back. “You might ask Mr. Hapworth if he knows anyone of that name!”

“Great Scott——”

"No, Ted Scott," laughed Ted.

Ted found his ham sandwich, that is, he found three of them, drank two large cups of strong coffee, went to bed and slept like a baby until he was awakened by the jangling of the telephone bell in his hotel bedroom at eight o'clock the following morning.

"Say, what's all this I hear about last night?" Walter Hapworth demanded.

"Probably not half what happened," Ted retorted. "What's the idea, waking a fellow up in the middle of the night?"

"Middle of the night! It's eight o'clock. Seriously, Ted, I'm worried about that fracas last night. I want to talk it over with you."

"Right! I'll be down as soon as I can grab a shower and a bite of breakfast."

Ted was as good as his word. A scant three quarters of an hour later he walked into Walter Hapworth's office at the plant.

He found a very much worried young executive pacing the floor of the office and trying, with scant success, to conceal his anxiety. Seeing Ted, he plunged at once into the subject of the attempted raid on the construction shed and its zealously guarded secret.

"I found one of the watchmen waiting for me when I got here this morning, Ted. His name is Moriarty and he gave me a highly colored account of your doings last night. I gather

that, in his opinion, you are a sort of super-man, wily to the point of genius and strong as a second Samson."

Ted Scott grinned.

"I happened to be able to help Moriarty out of a tight place and he's grateful."

Walter started to pace up and down the floor again, his hands thrust deep in his pockets, his forehead puckered in a worried frown. Finally he paused before Ted and regarded the young flyer anxiously.

"What do you know, Ted?"

"Nearly everything, I guess. Sit down, Walter, while I tell you what a lucky break we got last night."

The young airman launched into the story, relating events just as they happened. Walter listened intently, only interrupting now and then to exclaim or ask a question. Ted had almost finished when there was a knock at the office door. Walter looked up impatiently.

"Come in!" he commanded.

The door opened and a clerk stood on the threshold.

"Beg pardon, sir, but two men have been found gagged and bound at some distance from the plant. One of them's almost dead!"

CHAPTER X

A DARING RESOLVE

TED SCOTT and Walter Hapworth exchanged glances.

"Some more work of that fellow you call Red!" exclaimed Hapworth. "The victims are probably two of the extra men I had stationed at the plant."

He got to his feet hastily and turned to the clerk.

"Say nothing to any one about this. Whatever happens, the police must be kept out of our affairs. We cannot have publicity."

As the clerk disappeared, Walter snatched up his hat and turned to Ted.

"I want to keep the story of this attempt out of the papers if possible. To do that I've got to work, and work quickly. Want to come with me, Ted?"

"Sure thing," said Ted, and they went out of the office together.

It required all Walter Hapworth's influence to hush up the trouble at the plant.

The victims of the plot told of having been lured a short distance from the construction

shed by a respectably dressed man who told of having seen several suspicious characters lurking in the neighborhood; they were then set upon by a gang of ruffians and securely bound and gagged. One of them, resisting more fiercely than his companion, had been put out of the running by a vicious blow on the head with the butt end of a revolver.

Neither of the men was in a serious condition, despite the first exaggerated reports. Hapworth gladly paid their doctors' bills and bound them to silence with a generous sum of money.

"You'd be safer to call in the police," Ted commented. "These enemies of yours are a dangerous and determined lot, Walter. If they knew that the police were on the lookout for them, they might draw in their claws a little."

"I won't have the police interfering in our business," Walter contended stubbornly. "We'll simply strengthen the guard about the plant and trust to luck."

Other matters worried the builder of the new plane, chief among them being the continued silence of the dirigible, *Mercury*.

Nor were Walter Hapworth and Ted Scott alone in their anxiety. The whole nation was stirred by the inexplicable silence. The papers were full of it. Radio messages were sent out to the great airship but received no answer.

By the same medium of radio individuals all over the country were kept in touch with the latest news, or lack of it, concerning the dirigible.

The nation grew restive, began to demand that something be done.

It was this that Walter Hapworth and Ted Scott were discussing one afternoon as they sat in the former's office at the plant. Hapworth had given orders that any news concerning the giant dirigible be relayed to his office as soon as received. While they waited for news that did not come, the young men anxiously discussed the possible fate of the big ship.

"If the *Mercury* has gone down it will mean a double loss to me," Hapworth pointed out. "I'm fond of Paul Monet. We're old friends. Williams, too, is a valued associate. They are fine fellows, both of them, capable and courageous. Then, there are the papers. Naturally I am not anxious to lose them."

"What I can't understand," said Ted, "is the absence of all radio messages from the *Mercury*. It seems incredible that she could have gone down so suddenly as to have been unable to send out a call for help."

"Her radio apparatus is the finest in the world," Walter stated. "Even if badly crippled, she should have been able to send out messages reporting on her condition."

He was about to say more but the jangle of

the telephone interrupted him. He answered impatiently, but almost instantly his face changed, became alert and eager.

"About the *Mercury*? Yes, yes! What do they say?"

Ted Scott could gather little from Hapworth's tense comments as to the nature of the news that was being relayed to him. He waited impatiently until Walter hung up the receiver and turned to him.

"Several ships have reported sighting the *Mercury*. They all agree that she is evidently badly crippled and out of control."

"Drifting in which direction?" Ted demanded.

"Toward the west. The latest report is that she has been seen near Bermuda."

"Crippled, and yet no radio messages from the *Mercury*!"

Ted mused for a moment, then jumped to his feet.

"Walter, I'm going out after her!"

"You're what?"

"I'm going out after the *Mercury*. I'm going to find her and, if possible, help her!"

Hapworth pushed back his chair and got to his feet, holding out his hand to Ted.

"That's the talk, old boy! By Jove, I've a good mind to go with you!"

"Why not? I'll need some one and there's no one I'd rather have than you, Walter."

The prospect of action was a tonic to both Hapworth and Ted Scott. The fact that the mission was a difficult and probably dangerous one, only increased their eagerness to embark upon it.

They made their plans on the way out to the flying field.

They would need provisions to last them some time and enough fuel to provide against emergencies.

"My plane will be too small," Ted decided. "If we find the dirigible in serious shape we may have to take off her passengers. In that case, we shall need a bigger plane than mine for the job."

"That's right." Hapworth thought for a moment, then made a proposal that filled Ted with enthusiasm.

"I've a new plane, a beauty and just fairly completed. She has been built for passenger service and will hold about twenty, even more at a pinch. If you want her, Ted, she's at your service."

"Want her! Say, that's fine of you, Walter. Can we get a look at her right away?"

"Sure thing. If we hadn't been so interested in the new plane I'd have shown her to you before this."

Ted's first glimpse of the *Sky Rider*, as the new plane was called, filled him with enthusiasm. He examined its perfect mechanism,

picking out its fine points with the eye of a master mechanic.

“It will be a privilege to take this beauty on her maiden flight.”

“As far as the *Sky Rider's* concerned, we could take the air right now.”

Figuring the time it would take them to get ready, Ted and Hapworth decided that at the most conservative estimate they would require two days. Experience had taught them that the success of an air mission depends to a large extent upon the care with which each detail of it is thought out beforehand. They set about now working out these details with infinite pains.

It was Ted's wish that their plans be kept as quiet as possible. Every precaution was taken to prevent a leak, but to no avail.

One of the mechanics dropped an incautious word, this was taken up and embroidered, and almost immediately the papers blossomed out with front page stories of the young flyers' intention.

“Ted Scott Starts to the Rescue of Giant Dirigible. America's Foremost Young Airman Starts on Heroic Mission.”

Hating the limelight, Ted Scott was annoyed only by the publicity. He did not dream that the newspaper stories could have any bearing

either on his personal safety or the success of his projected flight.

It was about ten o'clock the night after the decision to go to the aid of the crippled dirigible had been made. Ted Scott had spent almost the entire day at the plant, overseeing preparations for the hop.

On the way home to his hotel he walked carelessly, going over in his mind all the events of a crowded day. He was about midway of a dark street when he heard furtive footsteps behind him. Surprised, he turned half about.

A heavy, blunt instrument came down with crashing force upon his skull.

Ted felt a sharp, agonizing pain. A bright light flashed before his eyes, then blackness descended upon him.

When consciousness returned to the young flyer, he found himself propped up in the tonneau of a car that moved swiftly through dark streets.

His hands were tied and a gag that tasted abominably had been thrust into his mouth. Tentatively moving his feet, he found that they at least, were free. His head ached and the jolting of the machine was a continued torment.

As consciousness returned more fully to him, he saw that the automobile was a large one and contained three men besides the driver and himself.

With an effort he raised his head and the

pain almost forced a groan from his parched throat. The fellow next to him came suddenly to life. Ted felt something hard press against his ribs.

"If you know what's good for you, Rube, you'll take things easy," a voice growled in his ear. "Nothin' ain't goin' to hurt you, see, so long as you act reasonable."

Ted Scott knew that voice. He recognized it as belonging to the gang leader who had planned the raid upon Hapworth's plant. There could be no mistake about it. The man sitting next to him in the tonneau of the strange car was none other than the unscrupulous scoundrel his comrades called Red.

Ted was completely mystified as to the reason of the attack upon him. He tried to think, but found that concentration made his head ache more unbearably.

He tested the bonds that imprisoned his hands and found them tough and securely tied. It was evident that, for the moment at least, he must let matters remain at rest.

The ride continued interminably through dark streets. After a while the breeze freshened and Ted suspected that they had turned toward the river.

Forgetting the gag in his mouth, he tried to say something about this but only produced a thick mumble in his throat. The gang leader

laughed and, reaching up, unbound the filthy rag that held the gag in Ted's mouth.

"It won't do no good to holler, see," the fellow warned.

"What's the idea of feeding me all this melodrama?" Ted asked quietly. "I've never done anything to you."

"Maybe not, maybe so," replied the gangster. "That's for us to say, young feller."

"You've made a mistake," Ted stated, still quietly. "I'm not the one you're after."

"You know a lot, don't you," sneered Ted's captor. "You'll be telling me next that you ain't Ted Scott."

"Suppose I am. What are you going to do about it?"

"We'll show you soon enough. Don't worry."

As the pain in his head slowly lessened, a slow rage surged up in Ted Scott. He felt that he would have given years of his life for five minutes with his hands free.

The car slowed down, took a sharp curve in the road, and stopped at the river bank. The men got out and Ted was told, none too gently, to descend.

A small boat was tied to a dock extending into the river, and toward this the young airman was forced by the ruffians. He debated his chances of escape, but realized that the risk

was too great. He must be patient and wait for his opportunity.

Two of the men pulled the small boat close to the dock. One of them jumped into it and began to tinker with the motor. At the edge of the dock, Ted faced his captor with blazing eyes.

"Some day," he gritted, "I'm going to give myself a treat. I'm going to beat you into pulp."

"None of your lip," snarled the rascal. "Now git!"

The boat left the dock and chugged out into the river. A dark shape loomed up before them and the motorboat slowed down and drew up alongside.

"We're there," snapped Red. "Shin up that ladder!"

CHAPTER XI

HELD CAPTIVE

TED SCOTT climbed up a rope ladder to the deck of a dingy barge. With his hands bound, this was not an easy feat, but he was pushed from behind and tugged at from above until he landed, half sprawling, on the deck.

For one mad moment he contemplated throwing himself into the river and so evading his captors. With his feet free, he could swim, even if his hands were bound.

The leader of the gang appeared to read his thoughts. An automatic pistol came into view as Red growled:

“One move toward that rail and you’re dead, see? I ain’t the only one that’s got you covered.”

Fuming, Ted Scott was forced below and shown into a stuffy dark hole below decks. When he hesitated in the doorway of this evil place he was shoved forward roughly. Stumbling over some invisible object, he fell, giving his head a brutal blow against a hard projection.

The pain was excruciating and for a mo-

ment the young aviator lay, half-stunned, listening to the voices of Red and one of his rascally gang.

Finally he groped for the sharp projection, found that it was the edge of a berth and pulled himself up painfully. Through a red mist of pain he heard the gang leader's instruction to the bargeman.

"I'm leaving this fellow with you, see? I've got other things to do. If he gets away before we're ready, you will answer to me, Bill, see? You know what that means."

Ted heard a sullen mutter in reply. A door closed and there was the sound of a bolt being shot home.

Ted waited, battling the pain in his head while his invisible captor fumbled about, muttering to himself. In a moment there was the scratching of a match and in the resultant flare the face of the fellow was revealed. The man took down an oil lamp hanging to a hook on the wall and applied the match to the wick. A feeble illumination filled the cabin.

Ted Scott was not encouraged by what he saw. A squalid, stifling hole, with no visible means of ventilation, it contained two berths, upon the lower of which Ted was lying, a wooden stand fastened to the wall and a few hooks upon which hung a sailor's jacket and an old weatherbeaten hat.

He glanced at the door. It looked substan-

tial and the bolt that secured it on the inside was a heavy one. Ted wondered if the bolt was all the fastening the door had, or if it had been locked from the outside. If that inside bolt were all it had——

His glance shifted to the guard, who had pushed an empty packing box up against the door and sat on it stolidly, his eyes on the ground.

The fellow was powerfully built, with the arms and massive shoulders of a pugilist. His hands were hairy and square and one of them held a revolver.

“Taking no chances with me,” Ted thought. “Wonder what all this row is about, anyway.”

Despite the throbbing in his head, Ted’s thoughts were clear. He could think back now to that moment when, taking a short cut through the lonely street, he had heard furtive, hurrying steps behind him. He remembered half-turning, the brutal blow on his head, and the sensation of rage that had possessed him when he realized that he was losing consciousness.

What was the reason for this attack on him? Revenge?

Ted Scott considered this seriously. Had Red and his gang learned the identity of the young fellow who had successfully spoiled their plan to steal the secret of the mystery plane?

That was possible, of course, and provided

the most plausible explanation of the attack upon him. Upon second thought, however, he felt inclined to discard this theory. The night of the attempted raid on the construction shed had been dark and overcast. Why, even the watchman, Moriarty, had not recognized him.

Moriarty! Had that garrulous Irishman talked too much, in spite of Hapworth's warning?

There was a possibility that lent force to the theory of revenge.

Still, Ted was inclined to think that something more serious than the satisfaction of a personal grudge was at stake. These scoundrels could have evened the score with him, if that was what they wanted, in a far easier and simpler way. This kidnaping had put them to a good deal of trouble, besides incurring considerable risk.

Why had they done it?

Ted's mind flashed back to the newspaper notices of his intention to go to the rescue of the dirigible, *Mercury*. He felt in a flash that now he had put his finger upon the core of the mystery.

His kidnaping, following so close upon the heels of his decision to fly to the aid of the giant dirigible, must, he felt, be something more than plain coincidence.

That idea opened up whole new fields of speculation.

The effort of concentration brought on such a throbbing in his head that for a moment he slumped against the wall back of the berth, his eyes closed, helpless with pain. The guard chuckled.

"That's right! Take it easy, young feller. You got plenty of time while you're here."

Ted opened his eyes and grinned.

"You don't happen to know how long that will be, do you?" he asked.

"Naw!" The man's tone changed and a crafty look crept into his eyes. "You'd better not try pumpin' me. You won't get yourself anywheres."

Ted did not reply. It was hard to speak with that red hot pain tearing at his eyeballs. It was hard even to think.

He began again on his last theory. How could his intention to fly to the rescue of the *Mercury* have any possible bearing upon his present predicament?

Ted had come to regard Red and his gang of thugs as the personal enemies of Walter Hapworth; or, rather, as the unscrupulous agents of Hapworth's personal enemies; these enemies being a rival concern, or concerns, interested in stealing the secret of Hapworth's new plane, built on the helicopter principle.

If this were true, why should the villainous Red turn his attention to thwarting an attempt to rescue the giant dirigible, *Mercury*? In

other words, what, if any, was the connection between the *Mercury* and Walter's mystery plane?

For a moment this question only appeared to complicate the mystery. Then the answer flashed upon Ted with such a blinding light of illumination that he was left amazed at not having thought of it earlier.

There was the solution of the mystery, plain as the answer to a well-known riddle.

Paul Monet and Steve Williams were aboard the dirigible and in the latter's possession were the patent rights, those valuable papers which were to remove the last stumbling block to Walter Hapsworth's plans for the production of his secret plane!

If Hapworth's rivals could not steal the secret for their own use, they could at least cripple Walter's plans, perhaps delay them indefinitely by preventing Williams' arrival with the essential papers!

With realization of the real strength of Walter's enemies, Ted's desire for his own liberty increased ten-fold. He could understand, provided his latest theory proved correct, the reason for his imprisonment. He, Ted Scott, would be held here on this dirty old barge out on the river where no one would think of looking for him until the plans of Hapworth's enemies could be accomplished.

"Not by a long shot!" Ted told himself.

“Red and his gang of cutthroats will have to think again.”

Ted's mind became clear and cold as he considered his own problem. What chance had he of escape?

Without appearing to, he studied the guard.

“Looks like a pig,” thought Ted. “I could fool him easily enough if I got the chance.”

There was the revolver to be considered. It was a squat, ugly-looking weapon, made for grim business.

Ted made a restless gesture. There was a sharp sting of pain in one of the hands bound behind him.

His fingers, groping for the cause, encountered something jagged and sharp. It was the splintered edge of a metal clamp that had bound the edge of the berth!

Ted Scott closed his eyes to hide the exultation that leaped into them. Then slowly, very slowly and cautiously, he began to saw the rope that bound his hands against the knifelike edge of the broken clamp.

CHAPTER XII

CLEVER STRATEGY

THE guard shifted on his hard seat and grunted impatiently.

"Getting tired?" asked Ted Scott, sympathetically.

The guard shifted his stolid gaze to Ted, suspiciously.

"What's that to you?" he demanded.

"Nothing," replied Ted cheerfully. "Only my sympathetic nature demanding an outlet."

The guard grunted again.

"If I was you, I'd can the chatter," he growled. "You're only wasting time."

"Well, there seems a lot of it to waste," Ted retorted. "Might as well be cheerful about it."

"See here, young feller, if you can see anything cheerful in the fix you're in, you're good."

"I admit it," said Ted.

The bonds about his wrists were loosening. One of the strands had been sawed through already. The splintered edge of the clamp was very keen. Progress was hindered by the ne-

cessity of moving cautiously. The guard must not suspect, and to this end Ted engaged the stupid fellow in pointless conversation in an attempt to disarm him by a show of good humor.

"If I can make him think I'm a cheerful idiot, incapable of realizing the seriousness of the fix I'm in, so much the better," he thought.

"You don't happen to have a cigarette in your pocket?" he queried hopefully, sawing away feverishly at the bonds.

"Say listen, what's the idea of all the chatter? D'you think I'd give you one if I had it?"

"You have a pleasant face. I had hopes," replied Ted. There was a sharp give to his bonds. Another strand gone!

"Say listen, I don't want to hear no wise cracks about my face, y'understand. If it's a funny-lookin' mug, it ain't my fault. You keep your wise cracks to yourself, will you?"

"Why, sure. But you don't happen to have a cigarette, do you?"

The guard grunted disgustedly and spat.

"You're a fool!" he remarked.

"So you haven't a cigarette. Just my luck! A smoke would have passed the time away."

The guard opened his eyes as wide as the folds of his fat face would allow. He shifted the revolver in his hand suggestively.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "You got the itch?"

A chill shot up Ted's spine. Did the fellow

suspect? An examination of his bonds now, and his hopes were doomed. With a tremendous effort, he preserved the expression of rather vacuous amiability that had so far deceived his captor.

"The 'itch'? Well, I don't know. If it's the result of a sock on the head, probably I have it. That was a nasty crack you fellows gave me."

"It was all right," asserted the scoundrel with relish. "You went down like a log."

The contemplation of Ted's going down like a log apparently gave Ted's captor great satisfaction. It diverted the scoundrel's mind, at any rate. For the time being, Ted's activity was safe from discovery.

He waited for a few moments, then began again, more cautiously, to work at the frayed strands. He talked constantly, throwing up a smoke screen of conversation to cover his operations.

"What's the idea, anyway?" he demanded. "I've never done anything to you fellows. Why should you pick on me?"

The man's little eyes narrowed unpleasantly.

"Oh, you ain't done nothing to us, you ain't, young feller? Just think back a couple of nights or so and maybe you'll remember somethin' you done!"

This gave Ted pause. He said nothing, but regarded his captor with interest.

So Red and his rascally crew did know the

identity of the young fellow who had come to Moriarty's aid that night at the plant! Curious to learn more from the man, now that he had turned informative, Ted pretended innocence.

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you don't know," sneered the fellow. "You never done nothin', did you? Maybe you'll be tellin' me next that Moriarty ain't spillin' the news to all his friends that it was Ted Scott routed a lot of bums single-handed the other night and fooled 'em into thinkin' there was a lot more fellers on the spot."

Ted was silent. If the good-natured Irishman had blabbed the truth, despite Hapworth's warnings, then there was no use in denying it. He could not find it in his heart to blame Moriarty. Leaks of that sort were almost sure to occur.

Had his, Ted's, first theory been correct then? Had the attack upon him been prompted by a desire for revenge?

Partly, in all probability. Still, Ted could not bring himself to believe that revenge was the sole motive. That there was some deeper reason he had little doubt.

Another strand broke. Ted felt a swift upspringing of hope. Only one strand still held. With this broken he would have the use of his hands again. And then——

He listened attentively. Could he be mis-

taken, or was that the faint sound of a motorboat far out on the river? Were Red and his gang returning? If so, Ted Scott knew that he must hurry or his last chance of escape would be lost.

The strand was stubborn. Would it never break!

"Listen!" Ted said urgently. "There are reasons why I've got to get back to shore—quick!"

"You don't say!" sneered his captor.

"I have money," Ted persisted, working away at that one stubborn strand. "I have money with me, if your precious friends haven't already stolen it. I'm willing—and able—to pay for my freedom."

"Yeh?" queried the guard. Cupidity appeared in his eyes for a fleeting second. "Who you bribing?"

"You!" Ted's direct gaze encountered the shifty look of his captor. "Name your price!"

For a brief interval the man appeared to hesitate, while cupidity fought with fear. He shook his head finally, but with obvious reluctance.

"Nothing doing! You don't know Red. My life wouldn't be worth a plugged nickel if I let you go!"

The last strand snapped! At the same moment Ted became aware that the sound of the motorboat on the water was growing louder.

He controlled himself with difficulty, realizing that he must use his wits as well as his muscles if he hoped to escape.

The rhythmic putt-putt of the motorboat came closer. Ted dared delay no longer. It must be now or never. He jumped to his feet, shouting loudly:

“Look there! What’s that!”

It was a simple ruse, but it worked. The guard started and turned toward the door. In that moment, Ted was upon him.

He gave the thug a terrific uppercut to the jaw that scrambled his already confused wits. As the latter lumbered to his feet, growling furiously, Ted seized his wrist and twisted it sharply. The revolver clattered to the floor.

“You rat!” snarled the fellow. “I’ll get you for that!”

He lunged toward Ted, but the latter, swift as a cat, evaded him. Ted’s fist connected with the fellow’s head and sent him reeling backward.

The man backed against the wall, head lowered like a bull, massive shoulders hunched. The revolver lay at his feet. Pretending to lunge for Ted, he attempted to pick up the weapon.

Again Ted was too quick for him. Kicking aside the crate on which the fellow had been seated, he leaped upon his antagonist, grappling with him before his fingers touched the

weapon. Then began a fierce battle for its possession.

Snarling, the gangster fought to reach his revolver, while Ted put every ounce of his strength into an attempt to thwart him.

Back and forth across the stifling cabin they reeled, grunting, panting for breath.

They swayed to and fro until they were close to the revolver again, fighting like wild beasts for its possession.

Ted felt himself pushed downward, crushed in the gorilla-like embrace of the gangster. The man's hairy fingers were reaching for the revolver. They were almost closed about it——

Ted thrust backward with such force that the gorilla grip was broken. At the same time he gave the revolver a vicious kick, sending it clattering under the berth.

With a furious snarl, the thug lunged out at Ted. Ted ducked under the blow, at the same moment launching a fearful blow at the gangster's jaw.

The blow landed neatly on the point of the chin. The fellow staggered backward, lost his balance and fell, striking his head with a thud upon the edge of the berth.

Ted waited, fists clenched, for his enemy to rise.

When the expected failed to happen and the fellow lay still, his bullet head lolling to one side, Ted realized that the fight was won.

Nothing now remained to bar his way to freedom but a locked door with a bolt on the inside.

He wasted no time on his fallen enemy. He leaped to the door and grappled with the bolt. It slid over easily enough and the door opened beneath his hand. He paused and looked cautiously into a passage that smelled of tar and ropes.

No one was visible and he stepped out into the passage, closing the door of the cabin after him.

He felt his way as quickly as possible to the companionway where he groped for the steps. Making his way upward, he paused again before stepping out on the deck.

He then noticed something that had been smothered by the noise of the scuffle below decks. The putting of the motorboat sounded very clear and distinct on the night air, as though Red and his rascally gang had almost reached the barge.

Ted Scott hoisted himself cautiously to the deck.

CHAPTER XIII

A DASH FOR FREEDOM

ONE glance about him assured Ted Scott that there was no time to be lost. He could hear the voices of Red and his men conversing in low tones.

The motorboat engine was stilled and there was a soft, scraping noise as the small boat brushed the side of the barge.

As Red and his men ascended the barge on one side, Ted Scott left it on the other.

It was a perfect dive. There was scarcely a splash as Ted's hands cut the water and he felt the river swirl about him.

He set off toward shore, swimming under water for some distance. When he came up for air he heard shouting from the direction of the barge and knew that his escape had been discovered.

"They'll be after me, all right," he thought, redoubling his efforts. "If they catch me this time, they'll make sure I don't get another chance to show them my heels. Well, here goes!"

Thanking his stars for a dark night, the

young aviator put all his strength into an effort to reach the bank before his pursuers.

He was a good swimmer, and now he used the overhand stroke, head down, arms flailing the water.

Every now and then he raised his head and listened. At last he heard the sound that he dreaded, the staccato explosions of a motorboat engine.

His pursuers had picked up the trail and were hard after him!

Ted had a good start. His enemies had lost valuable time boarding the barge and exploring the cabin below decks. Also, Ted suspected, Red and his companions had had difficulty deciding in which direction he had started for shore.

A glimmering light or two marked the shore line. Hopefully, Ted realized that the lights were appreciably nearer than when he had last looked at them. With luck, he might make it yet.

The shock of the cold water had cleared his head. The ache had gone and he felt curiously light and buoyant. It was good to have full use of his hands and arms again. He felt unbounded confidence in his youth and strength to carry him through any emergency.

The motorboat was gaining on him rapidly. It was a race between an engine and his own endurance.

The lights of the shore were very close now. So was the motorboat.

Ted Scott soon realized that his speed was slacking. His arms felt heavy, his progress through the water laborious. When he had about decided that Red had won and that the motorboat would overtake him before he overtook the shore, he realized that he was in shallow water.

His feet on solid ground made him feel his own man again. He splashed through shallow water in a labored run toward shore.

The motorboat veered off and Ted guessed that she was making for the dock where her rascally crew would land and attempt to cut off his retreat.

"Let them try it!" thought the young fellow grimly. "Once I'm on shore they will have a good time catching me!"

Nevertheless, Ted was wearied by his long swim. His muscles stubbornly refused to respond to his demands on them.

In a waking nightmare he dodged down a side street, knowing by the sound of running footsteps that the pursuit was not far behind him. Winded, he paused, debating which way to turn.

A short distance down the street the dark doorway of a rambling, shedlike shop invited him. Ted ran toward it, dodged into it.

The place was dark as pitch. Feeling about,

Ted nearly fell down a long flight of rickety steps.

Having descended these without breaking any bones, Ted tried to decide what kind of place he was in. It had the dank, underground smell of a cellar and from the number of crates and boxes over which he stumbled he decided that it was the cellar of a deserted warehouse.

He had just stubbed his toe viciously on the corner of a crate when he heard voices in the doorway above him. He crouched down behind a pile of boxes in a corner. His hand came in contact with a piece of old sacking and he drew this over him.

"Let's hope they take me for a sack of potatoes," he thought.

Heavy feet descended the rickety stairway. Ted heard grumbles and several savage exclamations as sharp-edged objects came in painful contact with knees and ankles.

"He ain't here, I tell you," one of the scoundrels protested. "I tell you I seen him run the other way."

"Give me that flashlight," said a gruff voice.

Evidently the command was obeyed. A gleam of light sprang up and played about the gloomy place.

"Nothing but a cellar full of old junk," grunted Red. "He ain't here, Lefty. You can see for yourself."

"While we're wasting time lookin' around

here, the fellow will do the grand duck on us," growled another.

This sentiment seemed to be a fairly general one, though one of the scoundrels insisted upon searching the cellar.

Beneath his wad of sacking in the corner, Ted Scott listened while footsteps came close, stopped before the piled up crates and boxes. He waited with muscles tensed, ready to fight his way to freedom with his bare fists if he was discovered.

"There ain't nothing here but boxes and a pile of old rags. Come on! Let's get out of this dump. We're just wasting our time!"

Ted listened while the footsteps receded; waited, doubting his good-fortune, while heavy feet ascended the stairway and the rough voices of the gangsters drifted off into the distance.

The young aviator came out from beneath the sacking, dusting off cobwebs that clung to his face and clothing. He groped his way among the litter of boxes until he reached the stairs, then took them three at a time, eager to be rid of the damp, close atmosphere of the cellar.

At the doorway he paused and looked cautiously about him. There was no sign of Red or any of his gang, and Ted Scott dodged out of the doorway and made his way from that evil place as fast as his legs would carry him. Having arrived at a more populous district, he slowed down and took stock of his appearance.

"I must look like a tramp," he thought. "It wouldn't surprise me to be arrested at any moment and hauled off to the police station as a vagrant."

He decided that, if he could get one at that hour, he would take a taxi to his hotel and slip in there by the rear entrance. This thought was checked by another.

"Did those scoundrels leave me any money?"

His hand went down into his pocket and brought forth a sodden roll of bills.

"So robbery wasn't the motive," he thought, regarding them. "Anyway, I owe something to Red and his gang for sparing my roll."

After a hunt through almost deserted streets, Ted at last succeeded in hailing a taxi. Having arrived at the hotel, he hurried through the tradesmen's entrance and, avoiding the elevator, glided upstairs to the floor on which his room was situated. With the door shut and locked behind him, he switched on the light and faced himself in the mirror.

He was a ghastly looking object. His face was haggard and there was a clot of dried blood on his temple where blood had dripped from a wound in his scalp. His hair was matted, his necktie was under his ear and his clothing was a terrible mess.

The young aviator grinned wryly.

"From the look of things I'm lucky to be here at all," he thought. "It's me for a hot

bath and a good long sleep. I'm so tired that I could sleep on spikes."

Thanks to youth and an iron constitution, Ted Scott felt little the worse for his harrowing experience the following morning.

"My skull must be made of iron to take a blow like that and not crack up," he thought. "I'm lucky not to be in a hospital this morning."

He bought a paper and eagerly sought for news of the *Mercury*.

There was none. The big airship had not been seen since the last reports of her drifting course over Bermuda.

In the light of the happenings of the previous night, Ted felt sure that speed was essential if the dirigible was to be rescued and brought to a safe landing.

At the plant the young airman found Walter Hapworth already at work with preparations for the trip. The latter cordially waved a hand at him and shouted:

"Hi, Ted! What's news?"

"Plenty!" Ted retorted. "Drop that crate of oranges while I tell you a strange tale."

Walter listened in amazement and growing concern as Ted unfolded the tale of his adventures the night before.

"You might have been killed, Ted!" he exclaimed. Then, more thoughtfully: "What do you think was the object of these scoundrels?"

"I've a theory about that. I admit it sounds wild, but I think it's the true one, just the same."

Hapworth listened attentively while Ted Scott expounded his theory, nodding from time to time in agreement.

"The attack upon me," Ted said, "was prompted partly by revenge, I suppose. But I think the real object, Walter, was to prevent me from going to the aid of the dirigible."

"But just why should they want to do that?"

"Because whoever is behind the operations of this Red and his gang has an object in preventing the landing of the *Mercury* in this country."

"Still I don't see——"

"Wait! This mysterious enemy of yours who has already tried to steal the secret of your plane would also have an object in trying to prevent the landing in this country of Steve Williams and Paul Monet who have in their possession valuable papers without which you will not be able to put your plane on the market."

"Ted, I believe you are right!" cried Hapworth excitedly. "My mysterious enemy, you believe, will go to almost any lengths to prevent the landing of the *Mercury* in this country because Monet and Williams are aboard her with papers that will remove the last obstacle

to the production of a plane which, I hope, will revolutionize the industry. A daring, an incredible plot, Ted!"

"But one that might succeed with a backing of ruthlessness and unlimited money," Ted persisted.

"Yes," said Hapworth slowly. "I agree with you. It might succeed. But it won't," he added, grimly. "That part is up to you and me!"

"Right!" Ted agreed. "We will have to be on our guard from now on every minute of the day and night. We can beat this mysterious enemy of yours, Walter, but it will take some doing. There's no use kidding ourselves!"

The business of preparation was speeded up as much as possible. By night the *Sky Rider* was loaded to capacity with provisions and fuel. Everything was in readiness for an early start the following morning.

A double guard was put over the passenger plane; in fact, the guard was strengthened all over the plant. When the owner of the plant and Ted Scott left the grounds that night they were reasonably confident that nothing could occur to prevent an early start on the following morning.

Ted had already written to Eben and Charity, explaining his plans. Now he stopped in a telegraph office to send them a farewell telegram. He would have liked to take a flying trip to the

Bromville House but knew that, under the circumstances, this was impossible.

He turned toward the corner, meaning to hail a taxi to take him to his hotel. Walter Hapworth had insisted upon this precaution, pointing out that, even though Ted were indifferent to his own safety, there was too much at stake for him to take unnecessary chances with it.

As Ted reached the corner he stepped back, startled.

A heavy stone whizzed past his head so close that it almost winged the tip of his ear. He whirled in time to see a furtive figure dart down the side street and turn into a dark alley.

CHAPTER XIV

IN DEADLY PERIL

IN A FLASH Ted Scott was in hot pursuit of his cowardly assailant.

He reached the mouth of the alley, but the figure had disappeared. Thinking that the fellow might have dodged into one of the doorways, Ted was about to investigate, when a thought struck him and gave him pause.

Suppose the stone-throwing rascal was only a decoy sent out to lure him into a carefully prepared trap!

"Nothing doing," said Ted to himself. "If that's Red's game, he's in for a big disappointment."

He made his way back to the better lighted street, keeping a wary watch on both sides. Reaching the broad boulevard he breathed more freely. He hailed a taxi and reached his hotel without further mishap.

He was uneasy in his mind. The persistence of his enemies worried him. He wished more than once in the restless, wakeful night that he had planned to keep guard personally over the *Sky Rider*.

"I don't know how anything could happen, but it might. I wish I were on the ground."

He dressed before dawn, after not more than an hour or two of unrefreshing sleep, and hurried down to the plant.

Everything there was apparently as it had been left the night before. Watchmen reported that nothing suspicious had occurred. The *Sky Rider* was in perfect condition, ready at a moment's notice for the take-off.

Ted was assuring himself of this when Walter appeared. The two went over the big plane together, checking up for the last time on the list of fuel and provisions.

"We can refuel in New York, if necessary," Ted said, as he and Hapworth came out of the hangar, drawing on gloves and helmets. "We may have a longer cruise than we expect and we want to be prepared for it."

Hapworth nodded and glanced up at the sky where the sun was tinting the clouds a rosy red.

"Looks like good weather, clear and no wind."

"With luck we should reach the coast well before nightfall," Ted agreed. "Anyway, we're getting a good early start."

The big plane was trundled slowly from the hangar. Ted gave it one last look of affectionate appraisal before he climbed aboard. Hapworth followed amid a cheer from the

mechanics and the handful of spectators gathered at the spot.

The big plane trundled over the field, gaining speed. With a triumphant zoom, her wheels spurned the earth, her nose turned skyward.

There was power in the drone of her engines; she responded alertly to each touch of Ted's experienced hand on the stick. In a few moments they had lost sight of the plant. The earth itself was a mere blur of misty landscape.

The young pilot kept his eye on the altimeter, sending the *Sky Rider* forward at the skimming pace of an eagle while gaining altitude steadily.

"I think we'll save time by flying high," he said to Walter. "This big ship of yours likes a considerable stretch of atmosphere between her and Mother Earth."

Walter nodded.

"I guess she flies best at a good altitude," he said. "How does she feel, Ted?"

"Sweet! She handles like a thoroughbred. It's great to have the first handling of her, Walter."

"I'm glad to have you break her in, Ted. No one knows how better than you."

They were silent for a while, enjoying the sensation of swift flight, while the *Sky Rider* zoomed on, obedient to the young pilot's least

touch on the stick, singing the rhythmic song of perfect mechanism.

"We couldn't have asked for finer weather," Hapworth observed. "Luck seems to be with us at last."

Ted nodded.

"We'll make the best of it while we have it. I don't mind telling you, Walter, that I feel safer, now we've left the earth."

Hapworth looked at him inquiringly.

"Anything new?" he asked.

Ted told of the stone that had winged his ear the previous night while he waited on a street corner for a taxi.

"I chased the fellow until it occurred to me I might be running into a trap. Then I returned to the corner, found a taxi, and reached the hotel without further accident. Just the same," he added, squinting over the fuselage, "I'd like to get a good crack at that fellow that threw the stone!"

Hapworth looked grave.

"I don't wonder you say you feel safer now that we've left the ground."

Ted Scott glanced at the instrument board.

"Ninety miles an hour. Not so bad, Walter!"

"If we can keep this up, we shall reach the coast sometime in mid-afternoon."

Ted nodded, and for another interval there was silence while the young airmen listened

to the music of the *Sky Rider's* droning engines. It was Walter who finally broke the silence.

"There's a mystery about the *Mercury*, Ted."

"Mystery?"

"Yes, I think so. For instance, if she was hovering over the Bermudas, badly crippled as the ships report her to be, why didn't she make an attempt to land?"

"She may have made several," Ted pointed out. "Landing isn't always easy for a dirigible, you know, especially if she has wind and air currents against her. Probably her captain tried to bring her down and couldn't manage it."

"But she can't stay in the air indefinitely, if one or more of her engines has failed her."

Ted looked grave.

"Naturally not," he agreed.

"Then what do you suppose is the alternative?"

"There seems only one alternative," Ted frowned. "Either the *Mercury* is helped to a safe landing in any one of several ways, or she plunges to the earth or into the water in one of the worst catastrophes this baby science of aviation has yet known. That's our job, Walter," Ted added. "To see that that horror doesn't happen."

"Of course," agreed Hapworth. After a moment, he added, slowly: "I've been thinking of that end of it, Ted, and I can't for the life of me see how we are going to help the *Mercury* to a safe mooring."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one thing, how is it possible for one plane to accomplish what it takes four hundred men to do?"

Ted hesitated.

"I have a theory concerning that, Walter. It may not work, but I'm going to have a hack at it, anyway. Look here," he broke off, "I'm thirsty, aren't you? How about an orange to quench said thirst?"

"Sure thing," Walter replied. "I'll fix one for you and have one myself. Come to think of it, it will taste good."

While Walter left him to unearth the small crate of oranges they had packed with their other provisions, Ted set the plane to a higher speed.

When the engines responded easily with only a deepening of their droning hum, Ted's enthusiasm soared. Here was a plane, he exulted, worthy of a pilot's best efforts. Here was a plane, he firmly believed, capable of accomplishing the titanic task he was about to set it.

Hapworth returned with the oranges. He set the crate close to Ted while he extracted one

of the juicy balls and began to peel it expertly.

Ted glanced at the crate once or twice. The third time his glance lingered.

Shifting the control stick from his right hand to the left, he thrust the freed right hand into the crate.

He jerked back his hand as though it had been stung by hornets. Clutched in his fist was something that gave forth an ominous, ticking sound.

"A bomb!" cried Walter. "Fling it out Ted! Quick!"

CHAPTER XV

QUICK WORK

TED SCOTT needed no second admonition to toss the bomb overboard. He flung the demoniac bit of mechanism over the side of the fuselage. He and Walter Hapworth leaned out of the plane to watch its flight.

It had fallen only a few hundred feet when it exploded, filling the air with a deafening detonation.

The *Sky Rider* quivered and plunged, caught in the disturbed air currents. The young pilot gave her more speed and, like a hard-driven automobile that leaps a shallow ditch in the road, the plane plunged through the disturbed area, winging her swift way to safety.

Ted Scott met Walter Hapworth's glance and whistled.

"That was a close shave! Another few seconds and we'd have been blown to bits," observed Hapworth.

"Better set to work, Walter."

"At what?"

"To examining the rest of our provisions.

For all we know there may be more bombs planted aboard."

Although Hapworth thoroughly ransacked all the bags and packages in the body of the plane, his most careful search failed to bring to light any other object of an explosive nature. The one bomb, so luckily discovered in the nick of time, seemed the one destructive gesture of their implacable enemy.

"That one would have been enough," Ted said when Hapworth came forward to report.

"It was an admirable plot," said Walter, "and just bad luck for those unknown antagonists of ours that it didn't go through to a successful conclusion. It makes me doubly uneasy about leaving the plant. If these scoundrels have taken to bombing, what's to prevent them from using some of their little toys to blow up my plant?"

Ted looked thoughtful for a moment, then shook his head.

"That would mean blowing up the mystery plane, and that, I imagine, is the last thing they want to do—until they have discovered its secret, anyway."

"I see what you mean," his friend agreed. "To bomb the plant now would be like killing the goose that lays the golden eggs; while destroying the *Sky Rider* would play into their hands to the extent of delaying the rescue of

the *Mercury* until they can lay their hands on my new method."

"With the hope that, in the meantime, the *Mercury* may take a nose dive into the ocean and never be heard of again," added Ted.

"The scoundrels!" cried Hapworth, angrily. "Ted, we've got to save the dirigible!"

"We'll do our best," Ted promised.

The rest of the trip to the coast was uneventful, with light winds aiding the speeding motors. Toward noon the young men ate heartily of ham and cheese sandwiches, mitigating the rather dry fare with water from the canteen.

It was after this brief pause for refreshment that Hapworth returned to the discussion that had been so dramatically interrupted by the discovery of the bomb.

"I am still puzzling over the problem of how we are going to help the dirigible after we find her," the young man confessed. "When ordinarily it takes several hundred men to pull her down——"

"Well, not quite," Ted demurred. "There's a new device whereby a dirigible may be lured into her hangar with the aid of only sixty men."

Walter was interested.

"That so? I hadn't heard about it."

"There's a new type of mooring mast that

has just recently been perfected," Ted explained. "It takes the place of the old-fashioned high mast and has the advantage of being able to fasten the dirigible at both ends instead of one, as in the case of the old type mast."

"That sounds interesting," Hapworth commented. "How does it work?"

"I'm not acquainted with all the scientific details, but I do know something of the principle. The steel mast, triangular in shape, stands in the center of a sort of circular railroad track."

"Railroad track!" repeated Walter and added, meaning to be jocular. "Does it run a train of cars?"

"Only one car," grinned Ted. "It, the car, is a light contraption and it supports one end of the dirigible. The nose of the dirigible, you understand, has been attached to the main mast."

"That's ingenious!" cried Walter. "Rigged up like that, I suppose the heaviest wind couldn't do much damage to the ship."

"The mooring is absolutely fool proof," Ted pointed out enthusiastically. "A damaging wind only swings the dirigible around in circles, instead of pounding her about or dashing her on the ground, as happened all too often in the days of the tall mast. There's another advantage," he added, his eye on the altimeter.

"The sixty foot mast brings the big ship close to the ground so that necessary repairs can be easily made."

"Sounds mighty efficient," Walter agreed. "But so far you have explained only the mooring process. Suppose you want to get the dirigible into a hangar?"

"Easy. The stern of the dirigible is then detached from the car and fastened to a pneumatic wheel device. This device is not on tracks, but can move in any direction like those chairs on wheels you see at Atlantic City and other water resorts."

"Yes, yes, go on!" Walter urged. "What happens next?"

"A tractor draws the stub mast toward the hangar," Ted obliged him. "The stern of the dirigible is fastened to the docking rails laid into the hangar. There you have the airship in as snug a shelter as you could wish."

"Sounds neat," commented Walter. "I'd give a lot to see this new type mast and watch the apparatus in action."

Ted nodded and, for a short period, gave all his attention to the controls.

"Best of all," he said, finally, "this new type of mobile mooring mast needs only about sixty men to operate it."

"Quite a gain over the four or five hundred usually needed to draw a dirigible to earth," Hapworth observed. "Still, admitting that all

this is very interesting, you haven't answered my original question, Ted."

"Which was?"

"How one plane containing a pilot and an assistant pilot can hope to accomplish what, at the very best, takes an elaborate mechanism and sixty men to do successfully. In other words, how is the *Sky Rider* going to help the *Mercury*, even if we find her?"

Ted Scott was silent for so long that Hapworth began to think he had not heard the question. Before he could repeat it, however, his young friend said, hesitantly:

"I told you I had a theory concerning that, Walter. I know as well as you do that the *Sky Rider* even with the help of her powerful engines cannot hope to bring the *Mercury* to a safe mooring.

"All I hope to do is to help the dirigible reach some place where there will be men and apparatus to do that work."

"Even at that I don't see——"

"Neither do I—not clearly, that is," Ted interrupted. "When we find the *Mercury*, if we do, I expect to learn the answer to quite a number of things that are worrying me just now. Our first problem is to find the dirigible."

The rest of the journey to the coast was made in record time. So sweet was the performance of the *Sky Rider* that Ted Scott pro-

posed they abandon their plan to stop at the coast for refueling.

"We have enough of both fuel and provisions to last us for a practically indefinite time," Ted pointed out. "If we land we'll be interviewed and photographed and all the other things that take joy out of a trip. Besides, we'll lose hours of valuable time."

So, allowing for wind and drift, Ted Scott set the nose of the *Sky Rider* out over the ocean. At nightfall Hapworth relieved Ted and the young pilot settled down for a short rest period.

"Call me if we run into anything or you need my help."

"If we run into anything you won't need to be called," Hapworth retorted. "Sleep heartily, Ted. I don't anticipate any trouble."

The young pilot was tired. The motion of the *Sky Rider* soothed him into instant deep sleep.

He fought through a fog of unconsciousness some hours later to realize that the *Sky Rider* no longer sailed untroubled air currents. She rocked like a small boat caught in the trough of a heavy sea. He rubbed his eyes and staggered to Walter's side.

"What's up?" he shouted.

"We're riding the fringe of a heavy wind," Hapworth shouted back. "I'm doing my best to steer clear of it, but we are continually forced back."

"I'll take the controls and you get some

rest," Ted ordered. "You will probably need all your strength later on."

Hapworth protested but Ted was insistent.

"I can manage her alone now. Later on may tell a different story. Better take your rest, Walter, while you can."

Nodding a reluctant acquiescence, the young man stretched out and, despite the rolling and pitching of the ship was almost instantly asleep.

Reference to his instruments informed Ted that the *Sky Rider* was nearing the area where their real search for the *Mercury* must begin. Also he realized by various indications of approaching dawn that he had slept longer than he had intended.

"No wonder Walter fell asleep," he thought. "The poor fellow must have been worn out."

The thought had fairly formed in his mind when a solid wall of wind struck the plane. It had almost the force of dynamite and for a moment even Ted Scott was daunted.

"A hurricane!" he thought. "Even the *Sky Rider* can't stand this!"

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE HURRICANE'S GRIP

THE wind was a titanic, ruthless force, on-sweeping, irresistible.

It battered the *Sky Rider* mercilessly, forcing her into the maelstrom of a deadly air whirlpool.

Ted Scott fought to prevent the almost inevitable. He tried to force the big plane downward, but only succeeded in catching her in another treacherous air current that swung her about and nearly capsized her.

By masterly airmanship and superb presence of mind, Ted brought her out of that danger only to find her dragged further into the maelstrom. He tried for altitude and found that also was impossible. He began to feel that he was in the grip of a devouring, insatiable monster that would be satisfied only with his complete destruction.

A glance at his instruments revealed them to be acting in a highly eccentric manner. He could tell nothing by them.

In the awful confusion he found that Hapworth, half-drugged by sleep, was standing

close to him. Ted thought that his friend was trying to say something to him, but he could hear nothing but the shrieking of the wind.

Hapworth gripped his arm, pointing downward.

"Land! Land!" Hapworth shouted. "It's our only chance!"

If Ted could not hear the words, he could at least understand the gesture.

The *Sky Rider* hesitated, shuddered like an animal mortally wounded and plunged forward drunkenly.

With a sinking of the heart, Ted Scott realized that one of her engines had gone dead.

There was a sharp jolt as some part of the plane gave way beneath the terrific pounding. Her nose lifted then plunged downward in an oblique nose dive.

She dived earthward at a terrific pace, banking dangerously, threatening every moment to turn turtle.

Were they sailing over land or water? Waging a titanic battle for the mastery of the plane, Ted Scott asked himself this question.

To land in the water, traveling at this terrific pace, meant sure disaster. Dry land offered scarcely more hope, unless the young aviator could check the plunging descent.

Dawn was breaking in a splash of gorgeous color. It flashed across Ted's mind that this

was an incongruous time to die with all the rest of the world just waking to life.

Were they falling over land or water?

Ted wrestled with the controls, striving to right to ship, to check her mad descent.

He succeeded with alarming suddenness. The nose shot up, propelled by a freakish air current, and the pilot was faced with the imminent danger of his plane turning turtle. He averted this peril only to find himself shooting downward again at terrific speed.

Now at last they could see what lay beneath!

It was water, but water dotted by small blots that must mean land.

"Islands!" thought Ted. "There's hope, at least!"

They were over water now. A vast, greenish-blue expanse of it rushed up to meet them.

The young aviator forced the plane, plunging, reluctant, toward one of the blots that grew steadily larger.

To make that island! That was Ted Scott's one ambition, and all his energy, all his masterly skill were brought to bear upon the problem.

Suddenly the wind that had been pounding the big plane mercilessly relaxed its grip. The incredible had happened. The *Sky Rider* had fought its way out of the path of the hurricane!

She was easier to handle now, but the problem of a safe landing was still something to be reckoned with.

The expanse of green-blue water zoomed up at them. In another moment, it would open its watery arms to receive a mass of sodden wreckage——

"We're not licked yet!" Ted cried, and forced the laboring plane toward the island.

"We'll land in the water," groaned Hapworth. "We can never make it!"

Ted measured the distance with his eye.

Two hundred feet from the ground and the wheels of the *Sky Rider* still over the water!

The land was close, though, tantalizingly close. It was a small island, lying low in the water. Ted thought that at high tide it might be partially, even wholly, submerged. Its surface was fairly level, not a bad landing place.

"We can't make it," said Hapworth again.

"Never say die!" retorted Ted and swung the big plane over.

Its wheels hung over the water. No, they were over land!

Feeling sure of himself, once more the master airman, Ted Scott brought the big plane to earth. It staggered on for a few hundred feet, bumping over the uneven ground, and came to a stop.

"That was masterly, Ted," said Hapworth as the young pilot dropped the stick and tore

off his goggles and helmet. "I was sure we couldn't make it."

"So was I," agreed Ted, climbing out to discover the amount of damage done the plane. "It was a lucky break, Walter, our losing the wind that way."

"Luck! I'd call it mighty good management! You're so modest, my dear old boy, that sometimes you give me a pain."

"I suppose it wasn't luck that we happened to be flying near some islands when the gale struck us," Ted grinned. "Maybe you'd call that good management, too."

"It was good judgment," laughed Walter. "There's a lot in being able to pick the places for your accidents."

On examination it was found that the *Sky Rider* had not suffered as much as they had feared. One of her engines needed going over. Her right wing, though badly bent, was not broken.

"We can fix the damage all right, but it's going to take time," Ted summed up. "What say we start now, Walter? Or shall we take time off for breakfast?"

"I vote for breakfast," said Walter, "I'm as hungry as a wolf."

They ate quickly, for they were anxious to get to work on the plane. They noticed, too, that the water was already encroaching upon the island. The tiny wavelets crept up with a

sucking sound as though eager to swallow the land.

"We won't have much time, at that, for our repair work," observed Ted. "We'd better make hay."

"While the island lasts," laughed Hapworth. "Where did I put that crankshaft?"

They worked steadily for several hours while the sun grew high in the heavens and the water crept up, inch by inch, upon the island. Several times they had to push the plane to higher ground before they could continue work.

Finally Hapworth straightened up and stretched his arms above his head.

"That was hard work. We've been at it hours, Ted. Look at that sun. Ask me, is it hot?"

"Worse than that," said Ted without looking up from his tinkering with the engine. "However, we can't expect north pole temperature in this neck of the woods. I'm going to try out this engine, Walter."

"All right. But I think she's O.K. Say, wouldn't I like to go for a swim!"

"Better not." Ted roused long enough from his preoccupation to regard the water. Beneath the brilliant sun it had turned to a glimmering turquoise. "It looks inviting, but I should say it was probably alive with sharks."

"I suppose so."

Ted returned to his tinkering and Hapworth

to his contemplation of the inviting sea.

"What's the use of having water on all sides of you if you can't take advantage of it?" the young airman finally remarked. "I think I'll take a chance, Ted. Just a brief swim and I'll be right back."

"I wouldn't. I tell you you're taking your life in your hands, Walter. This isn't a shore resort, you know."

"Or the Detroit River," laughed Walter, moving off.

Probably Ted would have protested his friend's going more vehemently if he had not tested the defective engine at that moment and found a fault in it. Chagrined and worried, he noticed only vaguely Hapworth's going, applying himself with anxious absorption to the new flaw in the engine.

Meanwhile Walter Hapworth strolled aimlessly about the island, looking for some place where he could dispose of his clothes and take a brief dip in the inviting water.

He did not despise Ted's warning about sharks. He supposed that the smiling waters about the island teemed with them, but he decided that the danger was slight provided he kept close to shore.

"If a shark tries to outswim me I'll beat him at his own game," he thought. "Here goes, anyway."

Leaving his clothes on the shore he waded

out until the water was to his shoulders, then turned on his side, swimming lazily. True to his intention, he swam close to shore, keeping a sharp lookout for sharks.

He saw nothing to alarm him, although once he thought he saw a sharp fin cut the water some distance from the island.

His swim was longer than he intended and when he at last turned back to the point where he had left his clothes, he felt compunction at the thought that he had left Ted to struggle with the engine all alone.

"I've stayed away too long. Ted will think I'm a slacker—and with reason."

When the swimmer had almost reached the spot where he had left his clothing he was startled as a sharp fin cut the water not six yards from him. While he stared at this apparition another fin appeared—and another!

Hapworth did not pause to count them. Driven by a horrible fear, he turned and swam madly for shore. He reached it safely and with a feeling of thankfulness drew himself up on dry land.

The sun was so hot that his skin was dry almost before he reached the place where he had left his clothes. The young man donned them hastily and turned to retrace his steps to Ted and the plane.

He had not gone far when he was forced to an abrupt stop. He stared uncomprehendingly

at the water that gurgled and chuckled at his feet.

"That lagoon wasn't there when I passed this way before," he thought. "Am I dreaming or crazy?"

A stream of water some six feet wide and stretching the length of the island barred Hapworth's passage to that part of the island where he had left Ted and the plane. As he regarded this phenomenon, the young airman realized suddenly what had happened.

The rising tide had filled a depression in the island, forming this artificial lagoon.

"The water must be fairly shallow," thought Hapworth. "I can cross it easily enough."

Suddenly his roving gaze become fixed, attentive. He drew back from the water's edge with an exclamation of horror. The lagoon swarmed with sharks!

CHAPTER XVII

HIDEOUS JAWS

WALTER HAPWORTH glanced about him, measuring with his eye the narrow strip of land that still defied the advance of the hungry water. Slowly the realization was borne in upon him that he was trapped. In a short time the lower portion of the island, that upon which he stood marooned, would be entirely covered by water. Ted Scott and the plane were on higher ground, which naturally would be the last to be covered by the rising tide. To reach Ted and that higher ground he must first cross the lagoon, and the lagoon swarmed with sharks!

"What I need now," Walter muttered, "is a trusty pair of wings!"

He went down close to the water, measuring the distance from dry land to dry land with an appraising eye.

His findings were not encouraging, for the lagoon, he saw, was wider than he had at first thought it.

"Must be eight feet if it's an inch. I might jump it, but the chances are I'd land in the

water, which would give the sharks a whack at me."

Walter Hapworth was a brave man. He was not afraid to die. But the prospect of losing an arm or a leg or being maimed in some other horrible way, daunted him.

He stepped back from the edge of the lagoon as the water lapped at his feet.

How rapidly it was rising! The narrow strip of land had shrunk measurably since he had stood there, debating. A dozen knifelike fins cut the smiling turquoise water. The sharks were closing in!

Hapworth had a sudden, appalling picture of what would happen when the lagoon had lapped up his narrow strip of land.

"I must stop thinking and do something," he told himself, and then realized with a nightmare sense of futility that there was nothing he could do. Short of flying, there was no way he could hope to extricate himself from an appalling situation.

He made a megaphone of his hands and shouted for Ted. A malicious fate prompted the young aviator to choose that moment to test the engine of the plane. The resultant roar drowned out Hapworth's voice, increasing his nightmare sense of futility.

The drone of the engine went on and on, now loud, now soft, as Ted worked for the perfection he demanded. All the time Walter Hapworth

stood there, watching the water of the lagoon creep up and up.

Would Ted never shut off that engine?

At last the sound stopped and Hapworth shouted again. This time he put the full power of his lungs behind the shout.

“Hey, Ted! Ted! Come here! Oh, Ted!”

There was a desperation in the call that made it a cry for help. It cut like a knife through Ted Scott’s preoccupation with the mechanism of the plane.

“Hello!” he yelled. “Where are you?”

Hapworth’s answering shouts guided him to the lagoon.

“Say, come on out of that!” Ted ejaculated, startled. “What do you think you’re doing, playing a little game with the sharks?”

“The sharks are playing a little game with me,” Hapworth retorted grimly. “The first move is theirs! As for coming out of it, what would you suggest?”

“Ask me another!” returned Ted. “How on earth did you get yourself in such a jam? Well, never mind. I’ll have to pull you out.”

“You don’t need a rope. I can swim.”

“So can the sharks,” Ted pointed out. “What I should have said was I’d pull you up.”

“With the plane?”

“Sure. I’ll fly over here and lower a rope. Sit tight!”

"There's nothing else I can do," thought Hapworth ruefully, as he watched Ted run back toward the plane.

A moment later he heard the engines running. Ted Scott's heart sank as he realized that something was wrong. There was a bad knock in one motor somewhere. If the plane was not ready to take the air, then the young man marooned on his dwindling island was in a most dangerous plight.

The motor stopped, began again. Still there was something wrong with it.

Walter Hapworth thought the water gurgled maliciously as it crept up closer to his feet.

There was the sound of the motors again. To Hapworth's straining ears they sounded better, almost perfect.

"Ted will have to take a chance," he thought, desperately. "Five minutes more, and I'm lost."

The water was lapping at his feet. He stepped back and found himself in more water. A chill crept up his spine. The water all about him was crowded with sharks. It was as though the giant sea pirates, scenting their prey, had gathered in numbers, biding their time until the rising waters should demolish the last barrier between them and their prey.

"Ted will have to take a chance," Walter repeated, almost in panic. "He'll have to, or I'm done for!"

Ted was taking a chance. The drone of the engines rose to a roar as the big plane trundled forward.

Around and around the island Ted took her, wondering why she was so slow to lift. He knew that Walter's predicament was perilous in the extreme, that every moment's delay was an added menace to his life. Still the big plane refused to lift.

"I should have had more time to tinker with it," Ted thought desperately. "Another half hour and she'd have been O.K. Come on, *Sky Rider*, do your stuff!"

It was more a prayer than a command. A sudden buoyancy and a rush of air past his face told him that he was obeyed. The *Sky Rider* was "doing her stuff!"

Meanwhile, Hapworth stood motionless. Water swirled and eddied about his feet.

There was a droning in the air above him, a roar as the plane swooped down toward him. Hapworth held his gaze turned upward as to his only hope of salvation. A rope dangled from the plane. If he could catch hold of that rope!

The *Sky Rider* circled above him, banked sharply, and swooped down again. This time the rope dangled only a few feet over Hapworth's head.

He leaped for it but could not quite make it. He fell back with a splash into the water. He

looked hopelessly about him. The water was rising with diabolical swiftness. The sharks were swimming closer, encouraged by the prospect of a feast. If the next attempt should fail——

The drone of the plane as it banked again, swooping down with a roar toward the water, encouraged him. It was lower this time. The rope dangled tantalizingly close to his outstretched arms.

Hapworth tensed his muscles and jumped for it. Again he missed and fell backward into the water, water not yet deep enough for the sharks to reach him.

Despair gripped him. He had missed his chance again, while all the time his horrible fate closed in about him! The water was about his ankles, rising steadily. He dared not miss again.

Again the plane circled, swooped. Watching it, Hapworth thought with a thrill of fear that Ted Scott was taking desperate chances. The big plane was in a nose dive, headed straight for the water. If Ted recovered in time he was a magician.

A rope dangled close to Hapworth's head. Above the roar of the engine he heard Ted's frenzied shout.

"Grab it!"

Walter's fingers closed about the rope. There was a loop in the end of it, and to this

he clung desperately. In his mind he thought over and over:

“Ted can’t make it. He’ll crash sure.”

There was a jerk as the swinging rope drew taut that threatened to tear Walter’s arm from the socket. He felt himself lifted from the water and carried upward.

Ted Scott, that master airman, had done it again! He had avoided destruction by a hair-breadth margin, but he had avoided it!

With a triumphant roar the *Sky Rider* zoomed upward.

CHAPTER XVIII

SIGHTING THE DIRIGIBLE

WITH Ted Scott helping him, Walter Hapworth climbed up the rope and fell exhausted into the fuselage.

"Ted, you flying idiot," he greeted his rescuer, "don't you know you came within an ace of cracking up?"

"Sure I do," returned Ted. "And all for a man who hadn't sense enough to grab the rope when it was dangling within an inch of his head! What did you think I was doing it for? Just a little stunt practice?"

"Where do you get that inch measurement? It was feet. And while I claim to be something of an athlete, I'm not an acrobat. But I sure thought you were a goner, Ted. Your recovery was a miracle of airmanship."

As usual, Ted Scott disclaimed any personal merit in the performance. In self-defense he shifted the limelight to his friend.

"That was a tough spot you were in all right. How did you manage to get in such a jam, anyway?"

Walter told briefly of his swim that lasted

longer than he had intended, of coming back to find himself marooned on part of the island by the newly formed lagoon.

They spent the remainder of that day cruising about in the hope of sighting the *Mercury*. Despite a sharp lookout, they saw nothing of her, and when darkness closed down they were as much in the dark as ever concerning the whereabouts of the giant airship.

"I'm sorry we ran into that hurricane," said Ted. "We wasted quite a lot of valuable time."

"To-morrow may tell a different story," his friend encouraged him.

Ted set the controls for altitude. He meant to cruise about in that neighborhood until morning, when he and Hapworth would search more thoroughly for the lost dirigible.

"If we don't find her, I think we'd better work our way down toward the Caribbean," Ted said. "Heavy winds may have forced her further down the coast. We'll have a look in that direction, anyway."

Hapworth nodded and, after a moment, touched on the subject that was apparently puzzling him.

"Suppose when we do locate the *Mercury* that we find her in a condition so dangerous that she is liable to immediate collapse. Have you any plans for such an emergency, Ted?"

Ted answered with another question.

"When you first introduced me to the *Sky Rider*, do you remember that I examined the apparatus on top of her with great interest?"

"You mean the apparatus featuring the steel hook?"

"The same. That apparatus gave me a great kick, Walter. More than that, it supplied me with a plan to be used in case we were successful in overtaking the *Mercury*."

"You mean," said Walter, eagerly, "that you intend to hook on to the *Mercury* underneath?"

"If she carries a trapeze, and I think she does," Ted agreed, "I'd like to have a whack at it."

"You could do it if anyone could," said Walter confidently, "but this hooking on is a dangerous business, Ted. A pilot is more likely to crack up than not."

"Still, in case of emergency, we might have to try it. Once securely moored to it we could either go up into it or offer the passengers and crew safe conduct aboard the *Sky Rider* to the nearest land.

"We would have to make several trips and each one would be dangerous, but I think the thing could be done."

"I believe it could," Walter Hapworth said slowly and with growing enthusiasm. "It's a sound scheme, Ted. It certainly is worth trying."

"My chief worry is that we shan't find the ship," Ted said moodily. "We've a large area to cover and if she has been forced too far out of her course any effort to locate her will be almost hopeless."

They drifted about for some time, each silently concerned with his own thoughts. Ted Scott became suddenly alert. It seemed to him that above the drone of the *Sky Rider's* motors he detected another sound. He turned to his friend, inquiringly.

"Do you hear anything, Walter?"

The latter listened for a moment intently, started to shake his head, then hesitated.

"I believe there is something. Can it be another plane?"

Ted's hand tightened on the stick while his eyes tried to pierce the blackness ahead.

"It is a plane, Walter. Coming this way and making time. I wish it were daylight. This promises to be too close for comfort!"

The sound of the oncoming plane became steadily louder. As Ted had said, it seemed to be heading straight for the *Sky Rider*. If one of them did not change its course, a collision seemed inevitable.

A gray shape zoomed out of the blackness. For a moment it towered over the *Sky Rider* so close that a collision seemed inevitable. Both planes banked sharply, swerved violently to the right by their pilots. They roared on into

the night, saved from destruction by an incredibly small margin.

"Whew!" whistled Ted. "Well, that's that!"

Nothing of any importance happened for the remainder of the night. The *Sky Rider* cruised about with Ted and Walter taking turn about at the controls until the early dawn made it possible for them to continue their search.

All during the morning they cruised about, keeping a sharp lookout for the *Mercury*.

Toward noon Ted and Hapworth held a hurried consultation with the result that early afternoon found the *Sky Rider* headed south, making directly for the Caribbean.

After a time they ran into heavy winds that drove them down the coast at a terrific pace and gave both Ted and Hapworth plenty to do at the controls.

The *Sky Rider* was a compact machine built for heavy weather. In spite of Ted's conviction that he should have spent more time with her motors before taking off from the shark-infested island, the big plane handled nicely, riding easily before the wind, the steady drone of her motors mingling with the roar of the elements.

During this stormy period Ted Scott searched the heavens constantly with his powerful glasses.

"If the *Mercury* has met with winds like

these, I doubt if she will be able to weather them," he said anxiously.

Hapworth nodded gravely.

"She may have crashed long ago," said Ted gloomily. "In which case we are on a fool's errand, all right. It seems to me," he added, after another careful search of the heavens, "that we should have sighted her before this if she's still afloat."

"We have a wide area to search," Hapworth reminded him. "However," he added, gravely, "if we don't find her soon, I shall begin to believe that we have come too late."

Soon after that and entirely without warning they ran into a blanket of fog. It was so dense that the pilot could scarcely see his hand before his face. The delicately sensitive compass of the plane was all that kept him on his course.

For what seemed an endless time they flew through this white blanket while the plane became coated with a heavy moisture that looked like frost. Ted felt as though he had been dipped bodily in a lake of sticky water.

"Let me take the stick for a while," Hapworth suggested. "You look all in, Ted. Take a rest."

Ted did not realize how desperately tired he was until he had surrendered the controls. He slumped down in the cockpit of the plane and gave himself up to unpleasant thoughts.

“While we are flying through fog so thick you could cut it,” he thought gloomily, “for all we know the *Mercury* may be taking a nose dive into eternity. Even if she is still afloat, she can’t buck the sort of weather we’ve met along the coast. I wish Mr. Monet were not aboard her!”

He put these thoughts into words for Hapworth’s benefit, and his friend was forced to agree with him. Paul Monet was a great friend of both of them, and each thought of his danger with a keen personal sorrow over and above their anxiety for the fate of all on board and of their worry about the possible loss of the papers in the possession of Steve Williams.

With the advent of the fog the winds that had accompanied them for so many miles along the coast died down, leaving them in a dead, white sea of silence. Being human and therefore unreasonable, Ted and Hapworth wished for the gale again—anything to blow away that maddening white blanket.

“We might pass within a hundred feet of the dirigible and not know she was in the neighborhood,” Ted ejaculated. “There must be some way of beating this fog, Walter. Let’s get above it.”

At an altitude of ten thousand feet they succeeded in shaking off the heavy mist, but realized that at that height they would stand as little chance of finding the dirigible as

though they had remained in the fog, since an airship in her crippled condition would be forced down inevitably toward the surface of the land or sea.

They descended again to find to their intense relief that they had passed through the fog area and were sailing once more through quiet air currents.

A glance at his instruments amazed Ted with the realization of how far and how swiftly the *Sky Rider* had been driven by her own powerful motors and the gales along the coast.

"We've come a long distance, Walter, and I'm willing to bet about anything I own that we passed by the *Mercury* in that fog."

He lifted the glasses to his eyes. As before, his eager gaze searched the heavens. Suddenly the lenses became fixed; he held them glued to his eyes.

Walter Hapworth snatched up his glasses.

"What is it, Ted? What do you see?"

"I think we've found it!"

CHAPTER XIX

TO THE RESCUE

TED SCOTT spoke in a low voice eloquent of intense excitement. He pointed to a black blot against the heavens, too distant to be seen without the aid of powerful glasses.

He jumped to the controls and Walter Hapworth relinquished them without argument. The next moment the *Sky Rider* was headed toward that laboring black blot.

Hapworth stood beside the young aviator, the glasses glued to his eyes.

"I believe you're right, Ted! That's a dirigible all right, evidently in sad need of assistance. Look at her buck!"

Ted did not reply. Now that the end of the long search was at hand, he was visibly excited, elated, yet anxious. He was realizing as he had not yet realized that the lives of the people aboard the crippled airship depended to a large extent upon his expert airmanship. If he failed——

The thought stiffened his resolution.

"I won't fail," he told himself.

The laboring black dot grew larger with the

swift approach of the *Sky Rider*. It was like a child's toy balloon blown up with gas.

This was no child's toy, however, as Ted knew full well, but a gigantic passenger airship which, though battered and practically disabled, still battled gallantly against destruction.

"She's about done!" cried Walter. "Watch her pitch and roll, Ted! I tell you, it's a miracle she's still afloat!"

"Even a miracle won't keep her afloat much longer," Ted replied, watching the laboring ship through his glasses. "Look at that!" This exclamation was caused by a sudden sharp dip of the big ship that threatened to plunge her, nose-first, into the water.

To those watching, her recovery was an exhibition of marvelous courage and ability on the part of the intrepid crew of the *Mercury*. To watch while the crew of the wounded ship battled their fate, to watch as they slowly, laboriously forced her nose up against the conflicting air currents, was a sight never to be forgotten. It thrilled Ted Scott and Walter Hapworth, watching that titanic struggle.

By this time they had eaten up most of the distance between them and the giant airship. With the aid of glasses Ted and Hapworth could see passengers hurrying to the glass-enclosed promenade, pointing with every evidence of extreme excitement to the approaching plane.

"They are evidently confident of rescue,"

said Walter. "Ted, do you think we can do it?"

Ted Scott was noncommittal. He spoke absently, his eyes on the dirigible.

"We'll do our best, Walter. What's that spot down there? An island?"

"Probably," returned Walter. "There are plenty of small ones like that sprinkled about these waters."

"Even a small island is better than nothing," Ted remarked. "I suppose," he added after another long scrutiny of the dirigible, "the captain has been trying to head his ship in toward the mainland."

"Or toward some one of the West Indian islands." Hapworth added. "Cuba can't be far away."

Ted consulted his instruments.

"I think we're closer to Puerto Rico. But it doesn't matter. Either one would serve as a harbor for the *Mercury*."

They reached the dirigible and zoomed up over her. They could see the passengers on the glass-enclosed promenade more plainly now. These struggled to retain their footing on the plunging deck, clutching at each other, the furnishings of the promenade, anything that promised support. They were visibly and painfully excited, gazing upward with pathetic hopefulness at the encircling plane.

"I'm going to drop a message," said Ted. "Stand by at the controls, Walter. I'll get

word to Captain Ralston, if it's humanly possible."

Ted had prepared the message hours since. In it he merely told who he was and spoke of his intention to hook on to the trapeze beneath the dirigible in the hope that he would be able to aid the passengers and crew of the stricken ship.

"Stand by, Walter," he directed. "Hold the *Sky Rider* to as even a course as possible. I'm in hopes that the captain will see what I'm about and show me where to drop the message so that he will get it most easily. That's it! A little lower! Hold her now!"

It was no easy matter to drive the plane close enough to the plunging ship to make communication possible without precipitating a collision. They flew past several times and finally a sliding hatch was opened, a long rod with a hooked end reached out and grappled Ted's message.

"So far, so good," muttered the young pilot. "Better let me take the stick, Walter. I'm going to try for a mooring."

Hapworth was glad to surrender the controls to Ted Scott.

"It will be a tough job," he said as they drew away from the dirigible. "I'd rather you'd have it than I."

The *Sky Rider* zoomed past the plunging dirigible, turned and came back toward her, flying low. Several times the young flier re-

peated this maneuver while he eagerly examined the trapeze-like arrangement on the bottom of the airship.

Now faced with the necessity for putting his plan into action, Ted Scott saw more and more clearly the tremendous difficulties in the way of its successful accomplishment.

To attach a plane to a mother ship was difficult enough under the best conditions of wind and weather. To attempt the same feat with a ship in the crippled condition of the *Mercury*, required infinitely more skill, expert judgment, coupled with perfect timing, a cool head, and the ability to cope with any emergency.

For a moment, as he circled about the plunging dirigible, Ted's heart misgave him. It was not possible failure, but the consequences of such failure that worried him. So much depended upon his skill and judgment, so many lives besides his own and Walter's were at stake, that it seemed to him the responsibility was too great for any one man to take upon his shoulders.

It was this very responsibility that stiffened him. He realized that he could not afford to fail.

"All set, Ted?"

"All set. I'm going to make the attempt this time, Walter. Stand by!"

"Need any help?"

"I don't think so."

The plane zoomed about in a circle and headed back for the dirigible. It flew low, the motors protesting at the added strain thus put upon them.

Ted measured the distance with his eye. His fingers tightened about the stick, his whole body seemed made of steel as he tensed himself for the big moment.

The plane was almost beneath the carriage of the *Mercury*. Ted coaxed for altitude, lifted her gently. Would she connect?

The jar for which Ted hoped and which would have meant success did not occur. The *Sky Rider* flew on, still free.

"What's one miss?" Ted muttered, grimly. "We'll try again!"

Again he flew low, groping for a hold upon the trapeze. Again he missed and swept out from beneath the wallowing plane barely in time to prevent a collision with her stern.

"You're shooting at a moving mark," said Hapworth. "Never an easy job. Take it easy, Ted. You'll make it."

"I'll either make it or we'll crack up," returned Ted grimly. "Watch this, Walter. I think it's going to be good!"

Ted was getting his bearings now. His two failures had not been wasted, for it had given him a more accurate idea of the relation between the hook on the *Sky Rider* and the trapeze on the dirigible. He was better able to

judge the distance and the exact amount of lift required to make the connection.

He returned to the attack with more confidence, guiding the plane with a sure hand.

When he was directly beneath the dirigible, however, a squall of wind caught her and forced her nose down with a suddenness for which Ted was unprepared.

"Watch out!" cried Walter. "We're going to crash!"

Disaster seemed inevitable. The plane, already flying low, could fly lower only at the imminent risk of plunging nose-first into the sea. Naturally she could not gain altitude, for the dirigible was directly above her. Neither could she fly forward without colliding with the carriage of the erratically plunging ship.

Ted acted with the swiftness that was part of his flying genius. Without a moment's hesitation and with apparently suicidal intent, he banked the plane sharply and plunged downward toward the sea.

CHAPTER XX

BOARDING THE AIRSHIP

Down rushed the airplane and the gray expanse of hungry water zoomed up to meet and engulf it.

With a mighty effort, Ted Scott brought the plane out of its nose dive, drove it on, the wheels skimming the surface of the water and sending up sparkling spray. After a few seconds it began to climb. The danger was over.

"No one but Ted Scott could have done it!" cried Walter Hapworth. "We were as good as dead men that time, Ted!"

"We're twice as good now," returned Ted. He did not smile as he said it. To tell the truth he was worried more, much more, than he would have cared to admit. His plan to board the airship, feasible enough apparently in the beginning, presented greater difficulties with every attempt he made. Ted wondered if he were attempting the impossible.

It was Walter Hapworth who put these doubts into words.

"Wouldn't it be better, perhaps, to throw

her a line and try to tow her to the nearest airport?"

"I don't think so. The *Mercury* is well-loaded with passengers which would make her difficult to handle. Then, too, we have to think of the safety of the passengers. There's no telling at what moment the *Mercury* may become entirely unmanageable and take a nose dive from which she won't come up. Those folks on the dirigible have had a bad scare. I'd like to see them safe ashore. Your Steve Williams and Paul Monet are on her, Walter."

"I should like to save those papers, I depend on Steve Williams and like him, Paul Monet is one of the most cherished friends I have, and no one but would shudder at the destruction of the big airship with all on board. Still, Ted, you're taking a big chance."

"I'll try once more," Ted told him. "If this fails I'll be ready to acknowledge myself licked."

However, though Ted did try again and failed, he did not acknowledge himself licked. He felt that the connection could be made, given patience and determination. As usual, the harder the problem, the more resolute became his resolve to master it.

He came back toward the ship, noticing that she was steadier than she had been. Drifting into one of those mysterious air harbors that are a boon to harassed airmen, the dirigible

rode more easily, minus a good deal of the erratic bucking and plunging that had made a connection with her almost impossible.

"Now's my chance," Ted told himself. "I doubt if I'll ever have a better."

Again the big ship loomed over him. Ted talked to the *Sky Rider*, coaxing her, easing her upward.

"Gently, now, take it easier. A little higher. A little higher yet. Right! There we are!"

There came a tug, a slight jolt, as the hook settled over the trapeze.

Ted Scott glanced at Walter Hapworth exultantly.

"I told you it could be done! We haven't cracked up yet, either."

Thanks to Ted's message, in which he had told of his plans, or rather his hopes, the captain and crew aboard the *Mercury* were prepared for him in the event that he succeeded in making the connection.

An opening appeared in the base of the carriage and a narrow runway let down to the plane.

Ted made this secure and started to ascend, Walter following. Ted pulled himself up through something that resembled a skylight and found himself in a narrow passage leading to the officers' quarters.

A stocky, powerfully built man in a captain's uniform greeted him, taking his hand in a

crushing grip and booming a welcome that came straight from the heart.

"Ted Scott, this is a big moment for me. I thank you with all my heart for gallantly coming to our aid. I believe you can help us as perhaps no other man could do."

Ted returned the captain's grip and stepped aside for Walter who had emerged through the opening.

"This is my friend, Mr. Hapworth," Ted introduced him. "Mr. Hapworth represents large aviation interests in the United States. In fact, it is in one of his ships, a passenger plane of a new and advanced type, that we have made this attempt to aid you."

There were expressions of good will on both sides, expressions that were far more than perfunctory.

Before the young men were led into a large apartment where they were greeted by the under-officers of the air cruiser, they asked eagerly about Paul Monet. He was summoned, and the meeting between the three close friends was one filled with emotion.

After a few words of rather incoherent greeting Monet said:

"I'll leave you now, for your first business is with the officers of the airship," and he went back to the glass-enclosed promenade.

The men all looked haggard and worn. They bore evidences of a tragic experience through

which they had carried themselves with courage and fortitude. They looked like men who had been tried to the utmost and had gained fresh confidence in their powers of endurance. They might be forced to retreat before the titanic forces arrayed against them, but they would do so grudgingly, step by step, disputing every inch of the way.

Briefly the captain related their experiences since that unfortunate day when engine trouble had first been reported to him.

"I thought little of it at the time," he said. "The trouble did not seem serious to me. Only one engine was affected and I felt that even though that failed entirely the others would carry us safely. I feel now," he added, his brow furrowed in deep lines of worry, "in fact, I know now that if I had ordered the return of the *Mercury* when trouble was first detected, I would have spared us all a frightful experience."

"It is hard to foresee everything," Ted said. "I am sure you have no reason to reproach yourself, Captain."

The captain's face darkened. He shook his head.

"With the lives of so many dependent upon me I had no right to take a chance. However, it is too late to think of that now. I did take the chance and before many hours regretted it bitterly.

"One engine failed entirely; the others were not performing properly. To make matters worse, we ran into heavy winds that prevented our turning back then if we had wished to. Finally a hurricane not only crippled us further but drove us far to the south of our route."

At that moment the dirigible rolled heavily, leaning first far to one side, then to the other, like an ocean liner forcing its way through a heavy sea.

The men exchanged uneasy glances. The harassed, haunted look returned to the captain's face, and he hurried on with his story.

"Things went from bad to worse," he said. "One after another the engines failed——"

"How do you account for that?" Hapworth asked.

"We don't account for it," the captain admitted. "We won't be able to account for it until we reach some airport where the motors can be dismantled and examined. There is some flaw, of course, but just what, we can't tell."

The captain shrugged his broad shoulders, a curiously hopeless gesture.

"Luck has been against us at every turn. Winds and fog have made it impossible for us to reach land. Our radio went out of commission utterly. We have drifted, battered and helpless, almost entirely out of hand, all our energies concentrated on keeping the ship

afloat, in preventing the crash that would cost such a toll in lives."

The captain squared his sagging shoulders and turned his haunted gaze upon the two young men.

"Up to the moment that our lookout discovered your plane on the horizon," he said, "my men and I had nearly given up hope. Now we dare to hope again."

"We'll do our best," Ted said.

Another sharp lurch and dip of the ship warned him that no time was to be lost. He feared for the safety of the *Sky Rider*, moored as it was, to the mother ship.

He turned to the group of officers who were regarding him and his companion with eager hopefulness.

"I'll outline my idea, sir," he said to the captain. "If it meets with your approval I think it would be wise to carry it out at once."

Ted launched into a description of this plan as he had outlined it to Walter Hapworth. The captain nodded approval, interrupting now and then to ask a question.

"We figure that we must be fairly close to Puerto Rico. After landing your passengers on the nearest island——"

"We have sighted one directly north by east, but have been unable to make progress toward it," the captain said.

Ted nodded.

"We've noticed it. After landing the passengers there, we can come back and try to tow the *Mercury* to Puerto Rico. She will be well taken care of there."

Captain Ralston gave the plan his unqualified approval.

"After days of the most frightful uncertainty you offer us safety and ask if we approve!" the captain commented. "I deliver myself, my passengers, and crew into your hands. From now on you are the pilot of the ship."

As the first step toward carrying out his plan, Ted Scott asked to see the passengers.

He and Walter Hapworth were taken at once to the lounge where the men and women (there were three of the latter) aboard the *Mercury* had gathered to welcome the flyers who had come to their help.

Steve Williams and Paul Monet were among them. Hapworth, after once again wringing Paul Monet's hand, went up to Williams and greeted him heartily. He at once engaged the two in a low-voiced, earnest conversation.

The other passengers crowded about Ted Scott and the captain, shaking hands with the young flyer and asking with tense interest about his plans for their possible rescue.

"I'm going to take you off," Ted told them. At his words silence settled over the anxious group. Ted could see hope dawn in their haggard faces. "I'm going to do this as quickly

and with as little risk as possible," he told them. "I depend upon you all to help me by doing exactly as I say and by not attempting to hurry or crowd. Now then. Who goes first?"

Ted could never afterward remember that scene without a return of the emotion he felt then. The gallantry of those misfortune-driven people was incredible. He had no difficulty in holding them back. His trouble was in making them come forward, so anxious was each one that the others be permitted the first chance of rescue.

In the end Ted was forced to make the selection himself, pointing out at random those who would make the first attempt with him to reach dry land.

The three women were included in this first selection, in spite of their protests that they be given no preference because of their sex. Paul Monet and Steve Williams both demurred, but Ted insisted that they should go with the first to be rescued.

"Your presence on the *Mercury*, Mr. Monet, is what first made me decide to come to the rescue. Of course, you go among the first."

There was not much to say to this, so Paul Monet yielded to the young aviator, as did Steve Williams.

His passenger list complete, Ted stressed the need of haste. Each passenger was permitted

to take with him or her a small number of personal belongings. The rest must remain aboard the *Mercury*, to be salvaged when—or if—the big ship reached the nearest airport.

Brief good-byes were said. Ted and Hapworth shook hands with Captain Ralston and his officers and everyone hurried to the lower deck.

There was no confusion. The passengers, inured to danger and delighted at even this slim prospect of rescue, made the hazardous descent to the plane in orderly manner.

The drifting of the *Mercury* had carried her much further from the island than she had been when Ted first sighted her, but the young airman was still confident of his ability to land the passengers in relays, then come back and tow the dirigible to safety.

“Just the same, the further she drifts off shore the harder our job is going to be,” he said to Walter and Paul. “We’ve got to make every minute tell.”

Ted found it easier to detach the plane from the dirigible than it had been to moor her. He accomplished this with a facility that surprised him. The *Sky Rider* slipped out from beneath the bulk of the giant airship and headed for the island.

That small speck on the water grew rapidly in size. As he approached it more closely, the young aviator saw that the island was not as

insignificant as it had seemed to be from a distance.

At one end of it was a village of some size with one long rambling building that seemed as though it were a hostelry of some kind.

"Not so bad," commented Walter Hapworth. "The rescued passengers of the *Mercury* may find fairly decent accommodations after all."

Ted nodded.

"Looks like it," he said. "Here goes for a landing, Walter. Hold everything."

In a long sweeping spiral, the *Sky Rider* began to descend toward the ground. Figures came running out of the houses to see the big airplane land. As he came closer to the earth, Ted tried to wave the natives back.

But they stood stock still, staring up at him with bulging eyes, mouths agape. They appeared to be animated by an all-absorbing curiosity and to have no idea of the danger they ran of being smashed by a wing or ground to death in the whirling propeller.

Ted Scott groaned in spirit.

CHAPTER XXI

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

"SEE that, Walter?" exclaimed the young aviator. "Those people are just flirting with death. I'll have all I can do to avoid hitting them."

He pulled the stick just in time, zipped upward and made for the other end of the island.

The spectators ran after him, but they could not keep pace, and the big plane came down on a level space, ran along for a few hundred feet and stopped.

Ted Scott and Walter Hapworth jumped out and held back the natives from the still-turning propeller, into which they might have blundered, to be cruelly maimed or perhaps killed.

That danger over, the flyers turned their attention to the rescued passengers. These climbed to the ground easily enough, although some staggered drunkenly at first because they had not their "land legs."

"We're so accustomed to the wallowing and pitching of the dirigible," Steve Williams explained, "that now we're on solid ground once more we don't know how to navigate."

Lieutenant Merkle of the airship had been detailed to look after the debarked passengers, and leaving them in his hands, Ted and Hapworth set off in the *Sky Rider* for a second trip to the dirigible.

"Has Steve Williams got the papers he went to Europe for?" Ted asked, when they were once more flying high above the water.

Hapworth nodded, his eyes kindling.

"Yes," he replied. "Steve tells me that he got them from the *Mercury's* safe and now has them snugly tucked away in his breast pocket. You notice how tightly he keeps his coat buttoned."

"What pleases me," remarked Ted, "is the fact that you've put one over on those mysterious enemies of yours. They're my enemies, too, since I got that crack on the head from Red and his gang. It does me good to know that we've outwitted those scoundrels and whoever put them up to their dastardly tricks."

As the *Mercury* loomed above them once more they forgot everything but the difficulties before them.

Ted found the mooring easier this time. The second attempt was successful. With some crowding, the remaining passengers were accommodated on board the plane. Once more the *Sky Rider* detached herself and bore her burden to safety.

But now the aviators knew that they faced

the most difficult task of all. They had rescued the airship's passengers. But could they save the ship?

"Still planning to head for Puerto Rico?" queried Hapworth.

"I think so," replied Ted. "There's an army post on the island as well as an airport. Between the two we should be able to jockey the *Mercury* to a safe landing."

Once more he hooked on to the *Mercury*. To Captain Ralston he stressed the need of haste. As a matter of form he offered to take off the officers and crew. As he had expected, they refused to leave the ship, preferring to fly with her either to safety or destruction.

Ted then outlined his plan briefly, the captain concurring in the main and offering one or two valuable suggestions. In the end it was decided that the *Sky Rider* should retain its attachment to the trapeze arrangement beneath the ship and endeavor to draw the airship in the direction it was desired to go. The relation of the plane to the ship would then be very much like that of a tug at the side of an ocean liner.

It was a ticklish and delicate business. As far as Ted Scott knew, it had never been done. There was no precedent to guide him. He did not know whether it was physically possible. Could the thousands of horsepower of the *Sky Rider's* powerful engines conquer the weight and inertia of the great dirigible?

The answer came when a few moments later, Ted Scott, his engines almost idling at first, headed the *Sky Rider* for Puerto Rico.

The lines drew taut, and the dirigible, like a great, wallowing mammal, began slowly and reluctantly to obey the control of the straining plane.

"Going to do it, Ted?" asked Steve, who together with Paul Monet, was accompanying Ted and Hapworth in the plane.

"Possibly yes, if the winds are friendly," replied Ted. "Certainly no, if the winds are hostile. It's a matter of touch and go."

He watched the barometer anxiously while he worked to get the last ounce of power from the motors of the plane.

At the least adverse gust of wind the *Mercury* reared and kicked like a fractious horse. She strained at the protesting ropes, fighting every inch of her enforced progress. If the instruments had not denied the impression, Ted would have been certain that he was being drawn backward. In reality he was making a fair rate of speed.

And this increased a little later when a following wind sprang up that drove both the plane and dirigible in the direction the pilot desired them to go. So persistent was it that long before the time counted on the city of San Juan, the capital of Puerto Rico, became visible on the horizon.

Not until then did Ted Scott permit himself a long breath. The strain under which he had been had taxed him to the uttermost.

At the airport energetic preparations were being made to render what help would be required by the disabled airship. The military authorities had taken charge and hundreds of men stood ready for orders.

The general impression was that she was proceeding under her own power, and it was an enormous surprise when the glasses bent upon her showed that she was being convoyed by an airplane.

The crew of the *Mercury* were standing ready with long hawsers to be dropped to the ground when the signal should be given. Ted brought the dirigible directly over the center of the airport, which was equipped with a mooring mast for such craft.

Then, when he had brought the great airship as low as he dared, he slipped out from underneath and made his own landing in the further part of the grounds.

In the meantime, the hawsers dropped from the *Mercury* had been caught by hundreds of eager hands and under skilled direction the dirigible was finally attached securely to the mooring mast.

The danger was over. The *Mercury* was saved! Ted Scott, having flown to the rescue, had brought the great airship to port.

The young aviator slept that night the sleep of exhaustion, but he woke at an early hour as he had much to do, especially in arranging that a steamer should be sent promptly to take the passengers of the *Mercury* from the island where they were temporarily marooned.

In spite of many years spent in the United States, Paul Monet was still too French to hurry over his morning chocolate. But Ted Scott and Walter Hapworth swallowed their coffee hastily and hurried out to look after the matter of the rescue of those left on the island.

Ted and Hapworth were returning to their hotel when the latter stopped abruptly and turned to look after a man who had just passed them.

"What in thunder is he doing in Puerto Rico?" Hapworth muttered to himself.

"Whom are you referring to?" asked Ted.

"That fellow who just went by," returned Hapworth. "Fallo is his name—Sidney Fallo."

"Do you know him well?" asked Ted.

"Too well," growled Hapworth. "He's in the same line that I am. Has an airplane factory in Detroit. I've come in contact with him in some business matters, and he's the most unscrupulous fellow I've ever met. He's been clever enough to keep out of jail so far, but he has absolutely no conscience. Wonder what crooked deal he's cooking up in this neck

of the woods? For whatever it is, it's crooked, you can bet your life."

Reaching the hotel he dismissed the incident and clapped Steve Williams on the shoulder.

"Now, old man," he said jovially, as all four companions gathered in his room, "let's have those papers, especially the one dealing with the patent rights. It'll be a sight for sore eyes. I'm honing to get a look at it."

Steve promptly took a package from his breast pocket.

"Here they are," he said, as he handed them over.

Hapworth sat down at a table, took the bands from the package, and ran over the documents. His face wore a broad smile, but that smile gradually faded as he neared the last of the papers.

Once more he went through them with exceeding care. Then he sprang to his feet, his face as pale as ashes.

"It isn't here!" he cried. "The patent rights agreement, the most important of all! It's gone! Gone!"

CHAPTER XXII

IN FULL FLIGHT

WALTER HAPWORTH's shout ended in a groan. His hearers leaped from their chairs.

"It must be there!" cried Steve Williams wildly. "Here, give them to me. I'll find it."

A moment later he dropped the papers and buried his face in his hands.

"Someone's stolen it," he groaned. "I'm the world's prize fool."

Ted Scott assumed command of the situation.

"All right. We'll assume it's stolen," he said crisply. "When did you see it last, Steve?"

"When I got the package back from the ship's safe," returned Steve. "I counted every paper, and the patent rights document was among them."

"Who sat next you in my plane on the first trip from the dirigible?" asked Ted.

"I was next to him on one side," said Paul Monet.

"We'll leave you out," smiled Ted. "Who was on the other side?"

"A man named Holman," replied Steve. "Gordon Holman."

"What do you know about him?" pursued Ted, with much concern.

"Nothing much," replied Steve. "Tried to press his company on me during the voyage. Didn't care for him much. An interesting talker, though. Knew a lot about airplanes."

"One thing has just occurred to me," put in Monet. "When Steve was getting the package out of the safe, Holman was standing close behind him, staring with all his eyes, and when he got to the airplane he jostled a man out of the way to crowd in close to Steve."

"He's the thief, for a thousand dollars!" exclaimed Hapworth.

"Perhaps, and perhaps not," replied Ted. "One thing, though, is certain, and that is that in ten minutes from now the *Sky Rider* is going to carry us to the island for an interview with this same Mr. Holman. Clap on your hats and come along."

Straight as an arrow to its mark, the *Sky Rider* winged its way across the silver streak of sea that intervened between Puerto Rico and the island where the passengers of the *Mercury* had been landed.

It was a perturbed quartette that jumped out of the plane after it had made a perfect landing.

Ted Scott sought out Lieutenant Merkle, the officer in charge, and told him of the arrange-

ment that had been made for the coming of a steamer to convey the passengers to Puerto Rico.

Walter Hapworth and Steve Williams and Paul Monet were, in the meantime, making a hurried survey of those who had been Steve's co-voyagers on the memorable trip of the big dirigible.

But they sought in vain for Holman. That suave individual had disappeared as utterly as though the earth had swallowed him. The fact confirmed the suspicion that Hapworth had been the first to voice.

"What did I tell you?" Walter ejaculated in vast chagrin. "All the others are here. They haven't any guilty consciences to bother them. Therefore they stay. But Holman has vanished. It's a case where flight is confession."

"I believe you are right," said Ted, who by this time had joined his comrades. "Still, we don't want to be too sure that he's gone. He may simply be taking a stroll on some part of the island."

"If he is, we'll get him," declared Hapworth. "We'll go over this place as if with a fine-toothed comb."

They did this, but for a long time without result. Discreet inquiries of the other passengers developed that none of them had seen the man since the day before.

Yet no steamer had touched at the island during Ted's absence. Nor had an airplane been heard or seen.

What had become of Holman? The four friends were fuming with vexation as they sought an answer to that question.

Finding their inquiries of the passengers futile, they pursued their search among the natives of the island.

Here again they were baffled. Everyone questioned professed utter ignorance of Holman's whereabouts, and there was a sincerity in their statements that carried conviction.

"The fellow must have had wings," declared Hapworth, flinging out his hands in exasperation.

"He's certainly flown the coop," observed Steve.

It was verging toward dusk when they came across a beachcomber lolling lazily on the sands. He was shabbily dressed, unshaven and blear-eyed, evidently one of the down-and-outs that are to be found almost everywhere in the tropics. He listened with but little show of interest to the questions put to him. But his first reply roused hope in the breasts of his auditors.

"Yes," he drawlingly admitted, "I seen a cove that answers to the description of the fellow you call Holman."

"When did you see him?" asked Ted eagerly.

“And where?” added Hapworth with equal animation.

The man, whom they had judged to be a former British sailor ruined by drink, regarded them cunningly.

“What’s it worth to you blokes to know?” he asked.

Hapworth took a roll of bills from his pocket, took off several of them and thrust them into the man’s hand.

“There,” he said. “Tell me the whole truth and I’ll give you a couple more.”

Satisfied cupidity gleamed in the man’s bloodshot eyes.

“Fire away, gov’nor,” he said. “I’ll give you the straight goods, so help me.”

“All right,” rejoined Hapworth. “Where and when did you see this man that I’ve described to you?”

“I seen him here on the beach jest about daylight this mornin’,” was the answer. “I wuz snoozin’ behind them bushes there”—he pointed to a clump of brush a little distance up the beach—“an’ I wuz woke by blokes talkin’. I took a squint at ’em an’ seen that one of them wuz the feller you been talkin’ about.”

“Who was the other man?” asked Hapworth.

“A sailor named Romero,” replied the man. “He owns a boat of his own an’ does a bit of

tradin' with the other islands in these parts."

"What were they talking about?" pursued Hapworth.

"This bloke you're lookin' for wanted him to take him away from this island and do it on the quiet," was the answer. "Romero didn't want to do it. Didn't like the looks of the weather. But the feller showed a lot of coin, an' finally Romero said he'd do it. He brought his sloop around, the other feller jumped in, an' they beat it."

The four searchers looked at each other in bitter disappointment. Holman had gone! And with him doubtless had gone the precious paper he had stolen from Steve Williams. But there was no use crying over spilled milk. Hapworth turned to the derelict.

"Do you know where they went?" he asked.

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"How do I know, guv'nor? The world is wide an' the sea don't leave no footprints. They went off in that direction," and he pointed vaguely to the right.

"But think," urged Walter. "Didn't you hear them say anything that would give you any clue to where they were bound?"

The fellow scratched his head.

"Seems to me I heard the word Santo Domingo," he said slowly. "Yes, once or twict they spoke of it, but of course I don't know for sure that that's where the blokes went."

"Santo Domingo!" exclaimed Ted. "From there he could get a steamer sailing to almost any part of the world."

"Yes," put in Monet. "But that doesn't say he could get one right on the jump. He might have to stay there for several days before he could get the one he wanted."

"He sailed this morning," mused Hapworth. "How long would it take him to get there, Paul? You know more about this part of the world than I do."

Paul Monet made a rapid mental calculation.

"With luck and favoring winds he may have reached there by this time," he said. "But Romero's sloop would have had to skip right along to do that. Lucky enough, perhaps, if he gets there by to-morrow morning."

There was nothing more to be learned from their informant, and after Hapworth had given him a few additional bills the four withdrew to consider their problem in the light of the facts they had gathered.

"What's the next step, Ted?" asked Hapworth.

"To take wing and fly to Santo Domingo," was the prompt reply.

"Of course, they may not be there," put in Steve pessimistically. "There are scores of islands in this sea and they may have stopped off at any one of them. That fellow didn't

know they were going to Santo Domingo. He just happened to hear that place mentioned. But they may have decided to go to some other, even before they pushed off."

"The clue is a slender one," admitted Ted. "But, after all, it's the only one we have, and the only thing to do is to follow it up. We're sure losers if we stay here, and there's a chance of winning if we make the Santo Domingo jump. I'm for it. What do you think, Walter?"

"I agree with you," said Hapworth. "If we had a couple of hours more of daylight left we could hop off right now."

"We'll start at dawn," decided Ted. "I'd jump off right now, if I thought we'd really save any time. But in the dark we might miss Santo Domingo altogether. Then, too, I'm not sure that they have any flying field there where it would be feasible to make a landing, and if they have I don't know just where it's located. It seems to me a case of the more haste the less speed."

"Right, as always," murmured Monet. "If we get off as soon as daylight breaks, we ought to get there in a couple of hours."

"Gee, I hope we nail that fellow!" exclaimed Williams. "I'm sure now that he's the one that got that paper, and the way he put things over on me makes me sore."

"My fingers are itching to get at him," added Hapworth savagely. "To-morrow morning then, Ted, at the first streak of dawn."

So it came about that, as the first pearly gray tints crept up the eastern sky, Ted Scott and his companions jumped into the airplane and zoomed up into the ether.

Ted turned the nose of the *Sky Rider* toward Santo Domingo, and the gallant plane leaped forward as though she shared the anxiety of her pilot and passengers to reach their journey's end in record time.

But the Fates had decreed otherwise.

Hardly half an hour had elapsed before ominously heavy clouds began to bank themselves on the horizon, and before long the *Sky Rider* was battling a gale that tested her own strength and the nerve and skill of her pilot to the utmost.

There was nothing beneath them but the open sea, and a landing was impossible. They must fight it out with the gale!

CHAPTER XXIII

ON THE TRAIL

THE wind increased in intensity and Ted Scott had all he could do to keep the *Sky Rider* on an even keel. The plane reared and plunged like a bucking horse, threatening at times to turn completely over.

But the daring young aviator was always at his best when the peril was greatest, and never for a moment did he flinch before the danger that menaced him and his passengers. His brain was like ice, his nerves like steel.

With uncanny skill he jockeyed the plane as a driver controls a frightened horse, curbing it here, giving it full rein there, never for a moment letting it get out of hand.

The wind screeched about the plane until it sounded like the yelling of unleashed demons. It tore at the structure as though it would rip it into fragments.

Through the tumult of the elements the young aviator drove, refusing to cower before the fury of the storm, taking the blows where they could best be borne, outwitting the cunning and malignity of the gale, until at last the

latter seemed to give it up. It had done its worst and failed.

Failed, at least, to destroy the plane. But it had succeeded in delaying it for hours and driving it many miles out of its course. Those were precious hours, and the occupants of the *Sky Rider* chafed and fumed at the delay. Yet they were so thankful for their escape from imminent destruction that they were ashamed to grumble.

"You pulled us through in wonderful style, Ted," said Hapworth warmly.

"With any other pilot we'd have been at the bottom of the sea by this time," added Paul Monet.

"Nonsense!" disclaimed Ted. "I had a good plane, that's all. The more I see of the *Sky Rider's* performances the more I like and trust her."

"Yeah," grunted Steve Williams noncommittally, but somewhat scornfully.

"She's a peach, all right," assented Walter Hapworth, "but the best of planes would be no good without the right kind of pilot. And we had the right kind and then some."

"How far are we now from Santo Domingo, Ted?" asked Steve.

Ted consulted his instruments and made a rapid calculation.

"Further than when we set out," he admitted ruefully. "That gale surely did make hash of

our plans. With fair weather we'd have been there by this time. But there's no use of grouching. I'll throw in full throttle and we'll get there in a short time."

Under the added power, the *Sky Rider* leaped forward like a frightened jackrabbit, and in less time than would have seemed possible the island of Santo Domingo seemed to lift itself out of the sea.

A few minutes later they were hovering over the city. Ted spent no time in looking for a flying field, but went down in the first suitable level space he could find in the suburbs of the city.

Leaving Steve in charge of the plane, Ted and Hapworth and Monet hastened to the wharves of the city.

Hurried inquiry among the offices revealed that a steamer bound for Havana, Cuba, had left Santo Domingo not more than two hours before.

Two hours! The three friends looked at each other with the same unspoken question in their eyes.

Hapworth turned to the agent of the line to which the steamer belonged.

"Could you tell me," he asked, "whether by any chance a man named Holman was one of your passengers on that steamer?"

The man consulted the passenger list and shook his head.

"No one of that name here," he replied.

"Put it in another way," persisted Hapworth. "Did anyone buy passage on the boat this morning? Anyone you didn't have on your passenger list last night?"

"Just one," replied the agent, again consulting his list. "Came around just about an hour before the boat left. His name was—let me see—oh, yes, Gregory Hunter."

"Gordon Holman—Gregory Hunter!" exclaimed Ted. "The same initials, G. H. Ten to one it's the same man."

"Likely enough," agreed Hapworth, catching Ted's excitement. "You'll notice in the great majority of cases that when a man chooses an alias he retains the old initials. Otherwise they wouldn't conform to the marks on his laundry or the band of his hat and might occasion suspicion." Then he turned to address the agent. "Did the man who called himself Hunter correspond to this description?" and he went on to portray the man as Steve had depicted him.

The agent nodded his head.

"That's the man," he said with decision. "You've got him down to a dot. But what's the idea?" he asked curiously. "Are you after him for something?"

Hapworth made a vague, noncommittal gesture, and the man continued:

"Because our steamer, the *Orient*, has wire-

less, and it would be easy to have the man held if he's a fugitive from justice or anything of that kind."

Hapworth shook his head.

"Thanks for the suggestion," he said. "But in the present state of our knowledge we don't care to go as far as that."

They bade the man good morning and went out into the street. There they faced one another.

"Well, we missed him," said Hapworth ruefully.

"No, we've got him," declared Ted.

"What do you mean?" asked Paul Monet.

"Just what I said," was the young aviator's reply. "Of course, he isn't actually in our hands at the present moment. But he might just as well be, for we're sure to nab him. We know where he is. He can't get off that boat until he reaches Havana. And we'll get to Havana long before he does and be waiting for him."

"That's a fact," agreed Hapworth. "That steamer probably won't dock at Havana until the night of day after to-morrow, while we could get there by to-night, if necessary."

"And will," predicted Ted. "Come along and we'll start right away. I want to reach the Havana landing field before dark if possible."

They hurried back to the *Sky Rider*, where

they found Steve avidly anxious to hear the news. He shared their regret that they had failed to catch Holman before he boarded the steamer for Cuba.

"Still, it's only deferred for a couple of days," he comforted himself. "We're vastly better off than when we started on this trip. Then we didn't know but what we were traveling on a fool's errand. Now we've definitely located the rascal and know that we're on his trail. It won't be long before he'll feel the nip of the handcuffs."

"I don't know about that handcuff stuff," remarked Ted thoughtfully, after they had left the island and were speeding over the Caribbean.

"Why not?" asked Steve in some surprise. "I figured that the first thing to be done was to enlist the help of the police and have them waiting for him as soon as the steamer reached the dock."

"But how can we do it?" argued Ted. "We may have a moral certainty that the man is guilty, but after all we haven't a shred of legal proof. On what ground could we ask for a warrant? That he was a fellow passenger with you on the *Mercury*? But so were about forty others. That he left the island without giving any notice to the others who were there with him? He had a perfect right to do so if he wanted to. That he gave another name than

his own to the steamship companies? That was his right, also. A prince uses another name if he wants to travel incognito. Prominent men do it sometimes so as not to be bothered with reporters. Don't you see how the police would laugh at us if we tried to get a warrant for Holman on such flimsy grounds as that?"

"I suppose they would," admitted Steve reluctantly.

"Then, too," put in Hapworth, "suppose we were able to get him arrested and the paper wasn't found on him. We'd be in a sweet mess. He could sue us for false arrest and soak us for heavy damages."

"What then are you going to do?" asked Steve. "Be your own police force and take things into your own hands? Strong-arm him, or what?"

Ted Scott grinned.

"I wouldn't put it quite so bluntly," he said. "But more than once I've found a way to get justice or do justice without calling in the aid of the police."

"And you think this is another such case?" queried Steve.

"I shouldn't wonder if it were."

"That sounds interesting in the abstract," observed Paul Monet. "But how would you apply it in this special case?"

"Well," said Ted slowly, "we have one advantage at the start in the fact that Holman

doesn't know that we're after him. He knows that Steve has no real proof against him any more than he has against any other passenger on the *Mercury*. He certainly knows that we haven't proof enough to warrant his arrest."

"Why should he have run away, then?" asked Steve.

"Did he run away?"

"Didn't he?"

"That's the question. He left the island. But perhaps he didn't leave it in flight."

"What other reason could he have?"

"To keep an appointment. To deliver the paper to the man who hired him to steal it."

Hapworth started violently.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "That's an angle I hadn't thought of. What makes you think that?"

"Simply because the biggest crooks don't do those things themselves," replied Ted. "They hire tools for that purpose. Holman in my judgment is a tool—probably of the same man or men who spent money so liberally in Detroit to discover the secret of your new plane and to thwart our going to the help of the *Mercury*."

"Now, if that's so, he'd naturally want to get the cash that's been promised him as soon as possible. The paper itself is no good to him. In fact, it's a liability until he turns it into

coin. So he makes straight for where he thinks the coin is."

"Then you think he expects to find his employer in Havana?" asked Steve.

"Not necessarily," replied Ted. "That may be just a way station on the road to the United States. Still, I shouldn't be surprised if Havana itself would give us the key to the mystery."

"Then your idea is to shadow Holman when he arrives there and see whom he meets and where he goes?" asked Hapworth.

"Exactly," replied Ted. "In that way we may kill two birds with one stone, as it were—the principal and the agent."

"Suppose he doesn't meet anybody, what then?" queried Paul Monet.

"Then we'll devote our attention entirely to Holman himself," returned Ted, "and if he has that paper on his person, we'll relieve him of the trouble of carrying it any longer. In other words, were going to get that paper. If we have to handle Mr. Holman without gloves—well, that will be just too bad for Mr. Holman."

"Sounds good," murmured Steve. "But just how——"

"I don't know just how," Ted interrupted him. "That will depend on circumstances. The essential thing is to be on the dock when

Holman gets in. Then we'll stick to him closer than a brother until we can force a showdown. We'll shape our campaign as we go along."

The weather continued perfect, and the *Sky Rider* had never made better time, so that well before the sun went down the adventurers had reached Havana.

The young aviator made a perfect landing and after arranging for the safe storage of the plane the friends repaired to a hotel, where for the next two days they waited with what patience they could for the arrival of the *Orient* with Holman on board.

They were glad to learn that it was not expected in till after dark, for in the shadows of the pier they could watch the gangplank without themselves being seen by the debarking passengers.

As dusk fell on the night in question, Ted Scott and his friends called a taxi and were driven down to the pier.

At a congested traffic crossing where they were forced to stop Hapworth gave vent to a startled exclamation.

"Fallo!" he exclaimed, as he pointed to a man who was walking swiftly in the direction of the dock. "What on earth is he doing here?"

"I thought he was in Puerto Rico," remarked Ted.

"So he was when we left, but something has

brought him here," returned Hapworth, much agitated. "Say, Ted! Could that something be Gordon Holman?"

"By Jove, it's possible!" exclaimed Ted, catching the contagion of his friend's excitement. "Fallo's an unscrupulous man and a business rival of yours. Holman has a paper that would be of immense benefit to Fallo. And here's Fallo going toward the dock while Holman on shipboard is coming into the dock. Is that simply coincidence? If so, it's a very remarkable one."

Their driver got the signal just then to go ahead and Hapworth, pointing out Fallo a little distance ahead, directed the man to go slowly and keep him in sight.

Their suspicions grew stronger when Fallo reached and passed onto the dock. They themselves stepped out of their cab and directed the driver to await their return. Then, drawing their hats low over their faces and keeping behind bales and boxes as much as possible, they worked their way to a spot where they commanded a good view of the pier where the *Orient* would be berthed.

A little time before the steamer was due Paul Monet stepped down from a stringpiece and in doing so sprained his ankle. The pain was intense.

Irritated and grumbling, he allowed Ted and Walter to call a taxi and put him in, refusing,

however, to allow any of the others to go back to the hotel with him. Once there, he called in a doctor who bound the ankle and ordered him to stay off his feet for a short while.

At the expected time the steamer swung into the dock and was made fast. Passengers came down the gangplank, and the pulses of the three watchers beat faster when they caught sight of Gordon Holman.

They beat still faster when they saw Fallo step out from the line of onlookers, shake hands fervently with Holman, and draw the latter's arm through his own.

Hapworth nudged Ted Scott violently in the ribs.

"What did I tell you?" he whispered through set teeth.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE TRAIL GROWS WARM

TED SCOTT and Walter Hapworth and Steve Williams followed the pair at a discreet distance and saw them hail a cab and step into it. Quick as a flash, Ted and his companions jumped into their own, giving directions to their driver on no account to lose sight of the car ahead.

This proved easy enough, as Fallo and Holman seemed to have no idea that anyone was interested in their movements and made no pretense of concealment.

At one of the leading hotels they registered and had Holman's bags carried up to his room, while they themselves went directly into the dining room of the hotel.

Ted who, with his friends, had watched these proceedings from the lobby, sprang at once into action.

"Walter," he said, "I have a plan. Can't explain it all now, but I want a free hand. Is it a go?"

"Sure thing," said Hapworth heartily. "Go to it."

"I'm going to take a room in this hotel," explained Ted hurriedly. "A few minutes from now you look at the register, get the number of my room and come up to it. I'll tell you then what I hope to do."

Hapworth and Steve assented and sauntered carelessly out of the lobby. Ted went over to the desk and registered. As he did so he noted carefully the number of the floor and room assigned to Holman.

From the diagram that the clerk presented Ted noticed that a room on the same floor and close to Holman's was vacant. He chose this with apparent indifference. The bellhop showed him to the room and left him.

Directly outside of Ted's window was a narrow balcony, whose extent he could not gauge in the darkness.

He had not switched on the light in his room, for, to carry out the purpose he had in mind, he wanted as little light as possible. He was glad to note that there was no street arc light directly opposite the hotel on that side of the building. The balcony was bathed in deep shadow.

With extreme caution he let himself out of the window and onto the balcony. Turning in the direction of Holman's room, he walked along, feeling his way, and was delighted to find that the balcony extended beneath the latter's window.

Softly, Ted tried the window. It yielded at his touch. He was immensely gratified at this discovery. He had feared to find it locked.

It was a French window, swinging on hinges, and he opened it just enough to satisfy himself that he could swing it open fully if he chose.

The balcony ended just beyond Holman's window. Shutters had been thrown open and the further one rested against the end rail of the balcony.

This left a triangular space between the shutter and the rail into which one could squeeze oneself and be invisible to anyone who might come to the window and look out.

"Just made to order," Ted chuckled to himself.

He hurried back to his own room, in order to be there when Hapworth and Steve should put in their appearance, and he had not been there more than a few moments before a soft tap on the door announced that they had come. He let them in quickly and in the darkened room conversed with them in whispers.

"I've reconnoitered the ground," he told them, "and I find that it's just to my liking. I've found a place from which I can see into their room and hear what goes on."

"If that's so, why not go in there now and search their baggage," suggested Steve impulsively.

"Not on your life!" objected Ted. "We haven't any official authority to do that, and, if we were nabbed, we'd be in bad. It wouldn't do us any good to say that we were only looking for our own. That sort of plea doesn't go with the police."

"What's your plan, then?" Steve asked of Ted.

"Something like this, I'm going to get behind that shutter on the balcony under Holman's room. From there I hope to see and hear what goes on in the room. I don't know what that will be, of course, but if they're really the conspirators we believe them to be, it ought to be interesting. If it seems to me to be necessary, I may even manage to get into the room and face the rascals."

Hapworth exclaimed against this.

"They'd be two to one, and they're both powerful men. Under the circumstances they'd be desperate, too. We'd better come along with you."

"There isn't room for more than one of us on that balcony. But this is what you and Steve can do. You can stay at my window in the dark and look along the balcony to the spot where I'll be in hiding. If I make no move, you needn't either. But if you see me go through that window, you and Steve make a break for it, too, for you can be sure there'll be a whale of a fight going on."

"We'll be there with bells on," declared Hapworth, and Steve nodded a vigorous assent.

"I'll go now," said Ted. "There's no telling when they'll come into the room and light up, and it won't be so easy then to get across the balcony without being detected."

As silently as a shadow, he drifted along the balcony and was lost in the darkness.

The minutes dragged on, each one seeming like an hour to the tense and impatient watchers.

Then came the sound of voices and the opening of a door. A switch was turned and a streak of light stabbed through the darkness that shrouded the balcony.

Ted Scott's pulses quickened. He pushed the shutter a trifle forward until, through its slats, he could get a glimpse of the interior of the room.

Fallo was throwing off his coat and loosening his collar at the throat. Holman had thrown himself into a chair and was lighting a cigarette.

"Stifflingly hot in here!" exclaimed Fallo. "I'm going to open the window. You'd think the bellboy would have had sense enough to do that of his own accord."

Fallo strode to the window and threw the casements back. He stood there a moment looking about him, and Ted held his breath.

But after a cursory glance at the surround-

ings, Fallo turned his back to the window, went back into the room, and threw himself into a chair at the table facing Holman.

"Now at last we can talk without fear of any snooping waiter!" he exclaimed. "I've been aching to hear your story. You say you have the paper, the one dealing with the patent rights?"

"Right here in my pocket," replied Holman, tapping his breast.

Ted made a note of the location for possible use later on.

"Good!" exclaimed Fallo with immense gratification in his tone. "I knew that I hadn't made any mistake when I picked you out for this job."

"You showed your good judgment," agreed Holman with a smile. "And don't make any mistake, it was a tough assignment. Had all kinds of trouble to pull it off. Tried it in Europe. Nothing doing. Tried it on the dirigible. Still nothing doing."

"When did you get it, then?" asked Fallo in surprise.

Holman chuckled.

"After we left the dirigible," he said. "You see Williams had put the papers in the *Mercury* safe. Of course, as long as they were there I could do nothing. I kept hoping he'd be taking them out to examine them while on the trip, and I stuck closer to him than a leech.

But nothing of the kind happened, and I was getting desperate when that airplane hove into view."

"What did that have to do with it?" asked Fallo.

"That's what I was getting to," responded Holman. "When the arrangement was made for all passengers to be taken by the airplane from the dirigible, they of course got their valuables from the safe, Williams with the rest."

Ted bent a little further forward, intent on not missing a word.

"I noticed the pocket in which he put the papers," went on Holman, "and when we left the *Mercury* I contrived to sit next to him in the plane. We were pretty well crowded together, so closely that I suggested we would be more comfortable if we took off our coats and held them in our laps."

"Clever," commented Fallo.

"Not so bad," agreed Holman complacently. "Williams agreed, and the rest was easy. I won't deny that it was easier because Williams was holding so animated a talk with his employer, Hapworth, that he was oblivious to everything else for the moment. I slipped the papers out, examined them hastily under cover of the coat lying loosely in my lap, picked out the one I especially wanted, and put the others back. Williams didn't tumble to the fact that

he'd lost it. In fact, I don't know that he's found it out yet."

"Oh, yes, he must have," put in Fallo. "Hapworth would have wanted to know about it and see it the first chance he had to see Williams alone."

"Maybe so," assented Holman carelessly. "At any rate, Williams hadn't missed it up to the time I left the island. And if he's missed it since, he's had a bad quarter of an hour explaining things to his boss."

"Hapworth will be crazy," and Fallo grinned malignantly. "It's about time I got the best of him. He's been thwarting every plan I've made for some time back."

"As for instance?" queried Holman. "You know, I haven't known of what's been going on here while I've been on the other side."

"Oh, in many ways," growled Fallo. "I say Hapworth has been doing it, but what I mean is that Ted Scott has been the real trouble maker. Whenever I thought I had things in train, he's come along and upset the apple cart."

"Tell me about it," suggested Holman, as he lighted another cigarette.

"Well, I sent a couple of fellows down to Bromville where Hapworth was staying," said Fallo. "I knew that he probably had important papers with him bearing on that mystery plane of his, and I told those fellows to get

them at all costs. Did they do it? They did not! This Ted Scott half choked the life out of one of them and chased the other out of town."

"Hard luck," murmured Holman.

"You said it," replied Fallo. "Had just as hard luck in Detroit itself, my own stamping ground. Was all set to get into Hapworth's plant and get pictures of the secret features of the plane. Hired Red Garrity and his gang to do the job. Everything going fine when this same Ted Scott came tearing in and broke up the party."

"That lad is some breaker," grinned Holman. "You've got to hand it to him."

"He's my Jonah," Fallo spat out viciously. "Tried to stop him when I heard he was going to the help of the *Mercury*. Had him kidnaped, but he slugged his guard and swam the river. Had a time bomb put in the plane, but he either found it in time or it failed to work. He must have——"

"One minute," Holman interrupted him, his more or less languid interest giving way to a stronger emotion. "You say that you tried to stop Ted Scott from going to the rescue of the *Mercury*? Why?"

"Because I knew that Williams was on board of her with that paper," snapped Fallo. "Because if the dirigible were lost and Williams with her, it would be weeks or perhaps months

before Hapworth could get a duplicate, and in the meantime I might be able to steal the secret of his plane. If I could have forestalled him in getting that contrivance on the market, it would probably mean millions to me."

"I see," remarked Holman coldly. "You were willing to let the *Mercury* be lost with all on board so that Williams might perish. You knew that I was on board and would go down with the rest. Yet that fact didn't bother you a bit. Am I right?"

"Why, why—" stammered Fallo, raging inwardly at himself at having let his tongue betray him. "I didn't—I wasn't—Oh, well, what's the use of putting things that way?"

"Because that's the way they are," replied Holman. "Because you told the truth without meaning to do so. You did all you could to ensure my death, with that of scores of others, in the hope that you could make money by it. I'm glad I know the way you felt about it. But that little slip of the tongue is going to cost you something."

"What do you mean?" asked Fallo.

"Just what I say," was the reply. "It's going to cost you ten thousand dollars in cold cash—ten thousand iron men."

"You're crazy," blurted Fallo.

"Crazy as a fox," was the reply. "I agreed to get you this paper"—he took a document from his pocket—"for ten thousand dollars.

Five minutes ago you could have had it for that. But after that little slip of yours the price went up. It will cost you now twenty thousand dollars."

"What's this—a hold-up?" asked Fallo furiously.

"Call it that, if you like," replied Holman carelessly. "You get it for twenty thousand dollars. Not a single cent less."

Fallo glared at him and Holman returned the glare. Both were being worked up to fighting pitch. So absorbed they were in their bitter quarrel that Ted Scott felt it was an auspicious moment to steal out from behind the shutter and crouch on the balcony directly before the window.

"How do I know it is the real paper?" snapped Fallo. "How do I know that you're not putting a fake over on me? Let me see it," and he snatched at the document.

Holman was too quick for him.

"No, you don't," he said, pulling it quickly out of reach. "I'll read you some of it though so that you'll know it's the real thing," and he reeled off several paragraphs that sounded official and carried conviction both to his seen and unseen auditor.

Fallo considered a moment, his brow a thundercloud.

"I'll give you fifteen thousand for it," he snapped. "Not a cent more."

"You'll give me twenty thousand," returned Holman calmly. "Not a cent less."

He had the whiphand and he knew it. Fallo knew it too and capitulated.

"I'll get even with you for this hold-up," he said, as he drew a checkbook from his pocket and reached for a pen. "Just now you have the bulge on me, but don't think that I'll forget."

He made as though to write, but Holman checked him.

"Nix on the check stuff," he said. "I told you that I wanted cash."

"Isn't this equivalent to cash?" protested Fallo, pausing with pen uplifted. "I have ten times twenty thousand dollars in the banks I'm going to draw on."

"Likely enough," assented Holman. "But there's nothing to prevent your stopping payment on the check ten minutes after you've handed it to me. Nothing doing. I want cash, coin of the realm."

"You don't suppose I carry twenty thousand dollars around with me loose in my pockets?" cried Fallo exasperatedly.

"Not so loud," cautioned Holman, with a glance toward the open window. "We don't want to air our troubles to people in the street. As a general thing, I don't expect you to carry cash into the thousands. But you knew I was coming to-day and you might have drawn it for

this occasion—ten thousand of it at least,” he added with a smile that infuriated Fallo. “You didn’t know, of course, that a slip of the tongue was going to cost you ten thousand more.”

It seemed for a moment that the two rascals were coming to grips. By a mighty effort Fallo controlled himself.

“You won’t take a check and I haven’t the cash,” he growled. “What is it then that you want?”

“Just this,” replied Holman. “Wire your Detroit bank to send you twenty thousand by cable. They’ll get it to you before noon to-morrow.”

“Very well,” grunted Fallo. “To-morrow morning you’ll get the cash.”

“And to-morrow morning you shall have the paper,” promised Holman.

“Not to-morrow morning nor any other morning!” came a voice from behind them.

CHAPTER XXV

SUBDUING THE RASCALS

FALLO and Holman sprang to their feet in wild alarm and amazement at the sound of the voice so near them. Simultaneously with the voice, a hand had reached over from behind them and snatched the paper from Holman's grasp.

As they whirled about they saw Ted Scott standing a few feet away, his eyes regarding them warily, his clenched fists ready for action. For a moment the scoundrels were paralyzed with consternation. Then rage awoke.

"Smash him!" cried Holman, and launched himself upon the young aviator.

He was met with a crashing blow to the jaw that rocked him from head to heels.

He staggered back, trying to retain his balance, and Ted turned swiftly toward Fallo, who had caught up a chair and was swinging it about his head.

But the threatened blow never fell, for Steve Williams and Walter Hapworth just then came leaping through the window and pounced on Fallo.

He went to the floor with a thud and Steve sat on him and held him down while Hapworth hurried over to Ted.

But the latter needed no help, for he had met Holman's attempted comeback with a hail of blows that stretched the latter gasping with pain and rage on the floor.

It was the work of only a few moments to fasten the rascals' hands together with their own belts. Then their captors permitted them to rise, and they slumped down sullenly in the chairs pointed out to them.

"This is an outrage," panted Fallo furiously, "a dastardly outrage! Assault and robbery! It's a state's prison offense. The police shall hear——"

Ted laughed outright.

"The police!" he chuckled. "That's good, coming from you, Fallo. Why, I've learned enough in the last few minutes to put you behind bars for the rest of your life. Still, I'm always ready to oblige, and if you really want the police in on this—" he made a movement toward the telephone.

"Never mind," interposed Fallo hastily, his face growing pale. "All the same, you people shall pay for this."

"I think you'll be doing most of the paying from this time on," rejoined Ted.

He drew the paper from his pocket.

"Here's that document of yours, Walter,"

he said as he handed it to Hapworth. "Sorry," he grinned, turning to Holman, "but I don't think you're going to get twenty thousand dollars for this to-morrow morning."

Holman bit his lips until the blood came, and if looks could have killed, Ted Scott would have died promptly from those that Fallo shot in his direction.

Walter Hapworth read the precious document eagerly. When he had finished, his face was beaming with satisfaction.

"It's all right," he asseverated. "The one thing needed to make my invention absolutely secure and complete! Ted, you're a brick. I can never thank you enough."

"That's all right, Walter," Ted waved the thanks aside. "I've had enough fun in doing it to pay me well. Not forgetting the delightful mix-up I've just had with you gentlemen," addressing Fallo and Holman. "By the way, Walter, what are you going to do with this precious pair? Suppose you call the patrol wagon and bundle them in."

Fallo winced visibly at this and Holman slumped still lower in his chair.

"A good idea," put in Steve. "Put the scoundrels where the dogs can't bite them for some time."

Hapworth looked at the captives long and thoughtfully.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "They

deserve jail richly enough, but there may be some other way out."

Fallo snatched eagerly at the suggestion.

"If it's a matter of money, I've no doubt we can come to some arrangement—" he began.

Hapworth stopped him abruptly.

"Money's all you think of, you knave," he said disgustedly. "You'd sell your soul for it and you think it can buy anything else, including your freedom from punishment. Get that idea out of your head. You can't buy anything of me with your money. If I let you go at all, it'll be for an entirely different reason."

"They wouldn't get off if I had anything to say about it," grumbled Steve under his breath.

"They're dangerous men to be at large," Ted reminded his friend. "I've got enough evidence to send them to jail for years, if you want to use it."

"I know," said Hapworth. "But I don't care for the publicity that would be involved. I haven't time to bother with the details of a criminal case. I'll be overwhelmed with business when the new plane comes out, and I don't want any distractions. I've got my papers. I've drawn the fangs of these rattlesnakes, or rather you have, Ted. I don't think they can do us any more mischief."

"Suffering cats! You don't mean to say that you're letting them go scot-free?" protested Steve vehemently.

"Not without conditions," replied Walter.

The conspirators' faces, that had brightened, fell again.

"The conditions are," went on Hapworth, "that each of these sneaks shall write out and sign a full confession of his crimes in this matter. I'll hold those confessions, and the first suspicious move that either of them ever makes will see those confessions turned over to the press and the police."

Holman said nothing. Fallo bristled.

"I won't do it!" he cried.

"Very well," replied Hapworth calmly. "Ted, suppose you call up the police department and ask them to send the patrol wagon."

Fallo made a supplicating gesture.

"Don't you see that puts me in your power body and soul?" he whined.

"No more than you are now," replied Hapworth. "I can have you in jail in ten minutes if I like. Of course, if you prefer that, you can have it. Otherwise you sign the confession. Make your choice."

Fallo, faced with the alternative, surrendered.

"I'll do it," he snarled. "Loose my hands and give me pen and paper."

These necessities were promptly furnished, and under Ted's prompting and in large part at his dictation the confession was written by

Fallo and the signature witnessed by Ted Scott, Steve Williams and Walter Hapworth.

Holman followed the example of the arch plotter with less fuss and protest. He knew that he was beaten and accepted the result as philosophically as possible.

"Now," said Hapworth, as he carefully folded the confessions, put them in his pocket, and rose to his feet, "I think we can leave you gentlemen to your reflections. You must pardon us for having come in rather hastily through the window. We will go out more formally through the door. Thank you for a delightful evening."

The three went out, followed by the inarticulate snarls of the raging and baffled conspirators.

"Oh, what a fall was there, my countrymen!" laughed Ted.

"Just when they thought they were riding high and sitting pretty," chuckled Steve.

"And now that we've finished our work in this hotel let's go over to our own," suggested Walter. "I'll breathe more freely when we get out of the poisonous atmosphere of those fellows."

Ted paid his bill, and the three friends were whirled in a taxi to their former quarters.

"You've had some stirring times, old fellow, during the last few weeks," remarked Paul

Monet to Ted, after he had been told of what had gone on.

"I surely have," agreed Ted. "I'll probably never have such exciting adventures again in all my life."

But in this the young aviator was mistaken—how greatly mistaken will be seen by those who read the next volume of this series, to be entitled: "Danger Trails of the Sky."

On the morning following the exposure and discomfiture of Fallo and Holman Ted Scott scanned the papers for news of the *Mercury*.

He was glad to note that rapid progress was being made in the repairing of the big airship. All that could be hoped for, however, was a temporary patching up that would permit her to resume her journey in comparative safety to the United States. There she would be completely overhauled and fitted with different type of engines from those that had failed on her initial voyage.

In his mail he found a letter from Captain Ralston. He was reading it when Walter Hapworth came in. Ted turned the letter over to him.

"How about it, Walter?" he asked. "You see the captain says the *Mercury* will be starting for the United States in two or three days and he wants us to go along in the *Sky Rider*, a sort of escort as it were."

"H-m," mused Hapworth. "That may be

because he thinks us a sort of mascot or else fears he may have need of our services again. In either event, I don't see why we shouldn't do it. We started this work of rescue, and we might as well see it through to the finish."

"Exactly my idea," declared Ted.

So it came to pass that when the *Mercury* once more took to the upper air and turned her nose toward the United States she was accompanied by the *Sky Rider* with Ted Scott at the controls, Walter Hapworth as navigator, Paul Monet and Steve Williams as passengers respectively.

Day and night the plane and the dirigible kept in sight of each other, communicating by means of signals previously agreed upon, the plane ready to dart to the aid of her "big brother" if the emergency should arise.

Only once was she called up, however, and that was when the temporary steering gear went wrong and the big ship wallowed helplessly in the teeth of half a gale. There was a wild time and an exhibition of superb craftsmanship on the part of Ted Scott as he fought his own battle with the wind and at the same time enabled the *Mercury* to keep on her course until her steering gear was again working perfectly.

They crossed the narrow stretch of sea between Havana and Florida, and at the Miami Airport the *Mercury* came down, this time for

permanent repairs. A great ovation greeted the dirigible and the *Sky Rider*, for their coming had been eagerly awaited, and Ted Scott, already the idol of the nation, was lauded to the skies. Once more he had proved himself the incomparable airman of all time.

Invitations to banquets and fêtes were showered on him and wherever he went he was followed by cheering crowds, until he longed for a chance to draw a quiet breath.

"You've got to stand for it, Ted," declared Steve Williams. "They're all crazy about you. Every man in the United States thinks you're the finest thing that ever happened."

"Not every man," said Ted. "I could name two exceptions."

"Name them," challenged Steve.

"Fallo and Holman," replied Ted Scott.

THE END

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